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## ***Contents***

Old Saigon	5
From the French Conquest to 1930	33
Revolutionary Upsurge (1930-1945)	62
<i>Portraits :</i>	
Nguyen Dinh Chieu	97
Truong Dinh	111
Ton Duc Thang	145
<i>Notes and Documents</i>	
— Amendment to the administrative status of Saigon (1862 — 1945)	153
— Municipal administration in Indochina (1936)	156
— Statistics of the thirties daily wages in the Saigon — Cholon region from 1931 to 1936	157
Communist militants of the thirties	
— In the death cell (by Pham Hung)	163
— Ready to face the guillotine (by Le Van Luong)	172
The Nam Ky insurrection (interview)	186
— Recollection of the Nam Ky Insurrection : A 'hospital' or the burial of the living with the dead	195
In the first decades of this century : Saigon in colonial times	200



# Old Saigon

CA VAN THINH — TA XUAN LINH  
and HUU NGOC

## 1. Geographical Background

The first European missionaries and merchants appeared in Viet Nam with the development of the first 'spice road' hundred years ago. The country was nominally under the authority of the *Le Kings*<sup>1</sup>, but in reality it was divided between the two rival seignorial families: the Trinh in the North and the Nguyen in the South. The Gianh river was the frontier between the two fiefs.

Cochinchina was the name given by foreigners to the land under the Nguyen. They made a distinction between Upper Cochinchina (Hue area) and Lower Cochinchina<sup>2</sup> (Mekong Delta area or Cochinchina proper), of which Saigon was to become the capital city.

It is interesting to consider the origins of the name 'Cochinchina', so well known in the West

1. *Le* dynasty (1428-1789).

2. Present-day Nam Bo (called Nam Ky by the French).

during the period of French domination. According to a plausible theory, it is two words joined together: Cochinchina. 'Cochin' might be a variation of the Chinese word 'Kiaotche' (Kutchi in Malay, Kochi in Japanese and Giao Chi in Sino-Vietnamese), the word by which the Chinese Empire of the Han designated Viet Nam, which they had conquered in 111 BC. Our country, which then consisted mainly of the Red river Delta, became the Chinese province of Kiao-tchi (Giao Chi)<sup>1</sup>. 'Kiao-tche' was also the name known to Marco Polo in the form of Cangigu (Kiao-tche-kouo). The initial form of 'Cochinchina', it seems, was Portuguese: Cauchi-china. The term 'China' was added for further geographical precision.

In Lower Cochinchina, or Cochinchina proper, Saigon existed in embryo, as early as the beginning of the 17th century, as a trade centre on the bank of a river called Dong Nai (Field of Roes). The river flowed through a plain where roes abounded. Vietnamese and Chinese junks, Malay, Dutch, Portuguese

1. The meaning of the word *Giao Chi* is still a subject for discussion among historians (*Giao* : to cross, *Chi* : toe). According to some authors (Dumoutier), the 'Giao Chi', ancestors of the Vietnamese, had their big toes turned in and when they put their feet together their big toes crossed. The '(Confucian) Book of Rites' mentioned the existence of men south of the Chinese Empire whose legs crossed naturally when they lay down. According to other historians, however, the word 'Giao Chi' indicated the country, not a people (cf. Do Xuan Hop and Nguyen Lam Cuong in '*The Hung Kings and the Building of our Country*', — Social Sciences Publishing House — Hanoi, 1970).

## OLD SAIGON

sailing boats went upstream to do trade, and even Spanish warships anchored there.

'From very early days, and certainly from the beginning of the 16th century, our city was a first-rate trade centre, which attracted crowds of foreign merchant navigators' <sup>1</sup>.

The name 'Saigon' designated the present-day Cholon quarter, while Saigon as we know it was successively called Dong Nai, Phan Yen and Gia Dinh by mandarins (according to the place chosen by them as the seat of administration) ; and B n Nghe (Landing-stage of Buffaloes)<sup>2</sup> or B n Thanh (Landing-stage near the Citadel)<sup>3</sup> by local tradesmen.

The name Saigon (Saic n in Sino-Vietnamese phonetic transcription) was mentioned for the first time in Vietnamese Annals by the encyclopedist and scholar Le Quy Don (1728-1785) in his "Thu Bien Tap Luc" (1776), a monograph of Thu n Hoa and Quang Nam provinces. He even gave an explanation of the birth of the little trading town.

1. Joan Bouchot: *Saigon sous la domination cambodgienne et annamite* (Saigon under Cambodian and Annamese rules), Albert Portail-Saigon, 1926.

2. Ben Nghe or Nguu Chu in Sino-Vietnamese — the place was so named because "it was located on the banks of a river peopled with crocodiles whose bellowing sounded like that of buffaloes" (explanation given by *Dai Nam Nhat Thong Chi* or General Geography of Dai Nam, edited in the 19th century, under the Nguyen).

3. The Saigon Central Market is still called Ben Thanh market.

The etymology of the word "Saigon" gives rise to much speculation and deserved more careful study (See Notes on the Origin of Saigon at the end of this chapter) <sup>1</sup>.

## 2. The Vietnamese Far West

As far as the agricultural population is concerned, these lands of the South, and in particular the Mekong Delta, present some analogy with the American Far West of the 19th century. The Red River delta, cradle of the Vietnamese nation, has been inhabited and exploited for thousands of years. Subject to an exacting climate and repeated wars of aggression, it offered no prospects for a further population expansion. On the other hand the fertility and more clement climate of the new lands to the South, still unexploited, offered a constant attraction.

In his "monograph of Gia Dinh" <sup>2</sup> (*Gia Dinh Thong Chi*) the Deputy Commander of Gia Dinh Territory, Trinh Hoai Duc (1765-1825), mentioned that as early as the 17th century, the Vietnamese had come to settle in the areas of Mui Xui (or Mo xoai) and Dong Nai (in the present-day provinces of Ba Ria and Bien Hoa). These lands were later reclaimed under the general designation of Gia Dinh, which included Phuoc Long (Dong Nai area) and Tan Binh (Saigon area) districts.

1. *Hachette*. Paris 1928.

2. Saigon area.

Social upheavals and the economic impoverishment resulting from the crisis of the feudal system from the 16th century favoured a southward immigration throughout the 17th century. As a result of a civil war lasting half a century (1627-1672) between the Trinh and Nguyen lords, the Nghe An-Bo Chinh region (now the provinces of Ha Tinh and Quang Binh), became a battlefield. To escape the menace of the fighting, corvees, military conscription and heavy taxes, the peasants emigrated towards the Mekong Delta where other groups of their fellow-countrymen had preceded them. *"With the Cham and Khmer peasants, they organized their society and improved their material conditions..."*<sup>1</sup>

The emigrants generally came by sea and stopped at Mo Xoai, Vung Tau<sup>2</sup>, Can Gio (Saigon River mouth), before going farther to find more fertile lands at Ben Nghe, Soai Rap (in the present-day province of Gia Dinh). *"The prefecture of Gia Dinh, the lands of Can Gio, Soai Rap, Cua Dai, Cua Tieu, were covered with jungle for thousands of miles. The Nguyen recruited people having properties in Quang Nam, the districts of Dien Ban, Quang Ngai and Qui Nhon, to transfer them there ; clearing and levelling opened up new lands and flattened the plain ; the newcomers were absolutely free to occupy any fertile spot, to grow arecapalms and build houses there".* (Le Quy Don)

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1. *Lich Su Viet Nam I* (History of Viet Nam) — Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi, 1971.

2. Called Cap Saint Jacques by the French.

The first important exodus took place in 1698 when the Nguyen evacuated, 40 000 households from Bo Chanh (present day province of Quang Binh) towards Dong Nai. A folk song at that time described how easy life was :

*If you so desire, go to Gia Dinh*

*There water is limpid, rice white and life easy.*

On the other hand : *"the Nguyen allowed rich land owners and mandarins to use the serfs and outcasts to do the land reclamation. These gently took advantage of their power and wealth not only to exploit that manpower and to rob them of the fruit of their labour, but also to occupy the ricefields and lands that the Cham, Khmer and Vietnamese had previously conquered from nature."*

The Nguyen also used part of their troops to set up agricultural colonies, *don dien*.<sup>1</sup>

The "agricultural soldiers" settled, married, and tilled the land they were there to defend, thus solving both problems of land occupation and food supply on the spot.

The Nguyen administration did not hesitate to turn into settlers prisoners of war, members of ethnic minorities, outlaws and deserters from northern regions. Under Gia Long (1802-1820), Northerners who opposed the King were thus deported to Gia Dinh. They were given the name of Bac Thuan (docile northerners) or Hoi Luong (Returners to the Good Path).

1. *Don dien* : don (military post) + dien (field, ricefield).

Political refugees and emigrants coming from China also received the right to settle in the Extreme South, for instance mandarins and officers of the Ming dynasty in 1679. China was then under Mandchu rule *"5000 Chinese led by Duong Ngan Dich and Tran Thuong Xuyen cleared the region of My Tho and Bien Hoa. Another group of Chinese under Mac Cuu exploited the region of Ha Tien"*<sup>1</sup>. Thus in the region of Bang Lan (Bien Hoa) there appeared on Pho Island (Cu lao Pho) the new port of Dong Pho inhabited mainly by Chinese immigrants who turned it into a trade centre often visited by foreigners.

### 3. The Old Gia Dinh

The word "Gia Dinh" often causes confusion, especially for foreign readers, since it designated either the old city of Saigon with its citadel, or the province which included Saigon, or even the whole of old Cochinchina. This is due to developments of history.

In 1679, an officer of the Nguyen lords set up a military post at Tan My, on the site of present-day Saigon.

In 1698, general Nguyen Huu Kinh, appointed governor of the New lands, created the Prefecture (*Phu*) of Gia Dinh. The region of Saigon became a

1. *Lich Su Viet Nam I* (History of Viet Nam) — Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi, 1971.

district (*huyen*) under it — the district of Tan Binh where was installed the seat of the administrative machinery and from where the authority of the Nguyen was to radiate all over the Cochinchinese borderland.

The district of Tan Binh further developed to become the Prefecture of Tan Binh. It had two districts, Tan Long and Binh Duong. The present-day Cholon belonged to Tan Long and the present-day Saigon (Ben Nghe region) to Binh Duong. (In some periods Saigon and Cholon formed only one administrative entity and in some others two, but Saigon remained a general name).

As we have observed, at the beginning of the 17th century Saigon was already on the bank of the "Landing stage of Buffaloes", an important trade centre well-known to foreign merchants. Its role was eclipsed by the rise of Dong Pho port on Pho Island (Bien Hoa) as a result of the settlement of Chinese immigrants.

Saigon regained its importance from 1777, when the Tay Son revolutionary troops, after driving the Nguyen lord (Nguyen Anh) toward Dong Nai, started big construction works at Gia Dinh: re-arrangement of Saigon harbour, and dredging of the Rach Chanh channel to facilitate river communications between Saigon and the whole Mekong Delta.

The geographically advantageous situation of Gia Dinh explained why it was selected as the capital city of Nam Ky (old Cochinchina). The following appraisal was given by historians of the Nguyen dynasty:



*"It is bordered in the Southeast by the sea and leans in the Northwest against a mountain. On three sides, it has large rivers and big bays. On the fourth side, the roadway directly leads to lands inhabited by the Man<sup>1</sup> (to the North)... High mountains, large rivers, river craft and vehicles go to and fro continually, resources are abundant. The population can have confidence: the position is very propitious. The best arms and ammunition can be imported from here, fish can be found in large quantities, salt and rice are produced. This is indeed a key position in the country, a solid point d'appui in Nam Ky"*<sup>2</sup>.

Gia Dinh was a communications centre for the South even in old Viet Nam: the road to the North built in 1748 joined the famous mandarin Route (today the National Highway No. 1) leading to the royal capital city, — to the west a road built in 1816 led to Cambodia, — there was also a very dense river communications net-work.

Towards the end of the 18th century, the district of Tan Binh became the prefecture (phu) of Gia Dinh. At the beginning of the 19th century, under the reign of Gia Long (1802-1820) this territory became the borderland (tran) of Gia Dinh (1802) with a governor whose authority extended all over present-day Nam Bo (Cochinchina). Under the reign of Ming Mang (1820-1840) the status of governor was abolished and Gia Dinh was simply one of the six

1. Savage (here: ethnic minorities).

2. Dai Nam Nhat Thong Chi.

provinces of Nam Ky. A map of 1815 shows that in this province of Gia Dinh, on the bank of the Ben Nghe river, present-day Saigon existed only in an embryonic form, with a single street (Saigon proper) and big market (Cholon)<sup>1</sup>.

Militarily speaking, Gia Dinh had twice (in 1654 and 1705) been a base from which troops under the Nguyen lords went to head off and wipe out Siamese armies. It also sheltered the troops under Nguyen Hue, the leader of the Tay Son peasant revolt. But its defence works were then only of beaten earth.

It was only in 1790 that a real citadel was erected by Nguyen Anh according to Olivier de Puymanel's plans. Conceived in the Vauban style, it resembled a blossoming lotus flower in form. As it had eight gates, it was also named "Citadel of the eight-sided magic diagram" (*Thanh bat quai*). It was built with big blocks of hardened laterite, and comprised a temple dedicated to the ancestors of the dynasty, stores, depots, an arms factory, and a flag tower 3 metres high which served as an observation post. The "Golden Citadel" of Gia Dinh was known as one among the 30 finest sights in Nam Ky.

It was within its walls that Le Van Khoi, at the head of insurgents<sup>2</sup>, resisted the royal power from 1833 to 1836. King Minh Mang had the citadel razed

1. Cholon literally means "big market".

2. We will deal with this episode later.

to the ground and another, less splendid, built in its place.

In 1859, royal troops supported by the population held out against the French attack for two months, entrenched in the citadel. The French succeeded in occupying it at last, but were in their turn assaulted and encircled. They withdrew and levelled it to the ground. Only a deep moat is now left of the citadel in downtown Saigon.

The urban centre of Gia Dinh (Saigon) continued to spread in spite of the vicissitudes of its citadel. In the twenties of last century, foreigners discovered an important source of goods here :

*"Saigon bazaars contain much unrefined porcelain, Tonkin crêpe, silk, satin, Chinese fans, etc. These are goods that can be seen most commonly in the shops. Streets are straight, wide and convenient, with a large population"*<sup>1</sup>

*"Dai Nam Nhat Thong Chi"* — the official geography book of the Nguyen — mentioned a whole series of markets at Saigon : old Ben Thanh, Ben Soi, Dieu Khien, Nguyen Thuc, Thi Nghe, Tan Canh, Ben Nghe, Saigon, etc...

The last-named — now called Cholon — was described in the following terms :

*"The market stands on both sides of the mandarin route which acts as the main thoroughfare. It is*

1. Jean Bouchot (op. cit).

cut by three streets which all lead to the landing-stage on the river. Parallel to the river is the central street. The whole system is reminiscent of the ideogram dien ( 田 ). Dwelling houses huddle together, stairway to stairway, roof against roof. The Kinh (majority Vietnamese) and Tho (minority people)<sup>1</sup> live side by side over 3 dam<sup>2</sup> goods are piled up, everything can be found north and south of the landing stage. On festive nights, such as the new year's eve, the 1st and 15th days of every lunar month, lanterns are hung, altars are set up, people compete in skill, lights twinkle on trees and bridges like stars. Bugles and drums resound; young men and girls go to and fro restlessly. It is a real city in festive mood."

From 1861 on, as French occupation meant that Saigon was transformed into a colonial city<sup>3</sup>, Old Gia Dinh had seen its heyday.

#### 4. National Character and Peculiarities of the South

In settling in the Mekong Delta which is permanently fertilized by alluvial deposits, the Gia Dinh-Saigon pioneer generations created for themselves a new "native land" where they could be

1. Chinese, according to another version.

2. dam : approximately 888m.

3. Dai Nam Nhat Thong Chi.

more or less free from the constraints imposed by an ancient feudal regime. Historical testimonies given by "*Phu Bien tap Luc*"<sup>1</sup> and "*Gia Dinh Thong Chi*"<sup>2</sup> show that they nevertheless remained faithful to their forebears whose language, traditions and most outstanding characters they still preserved most piously. They constantly thought of Thang Long "*The city of the Rising Dragon*" — that is Hanoi — as a symbol of their nation:

*Our heart always strains towards our thousand-  
year old Thang Long*  
(folk song)

*People's hearts are like sunflowers  
In their hundreds and their thousands, these  
flowers turn towards the sun (the North)*  
(folk song)

*We are taught that we must go back to sources  
How could descendants repudiate their own  
ancestors?*  
(folk song)

All northern customs, the way of dressing, chewing betel, organizing marriages, funerals and Tet (Lunar New Year) games... were preserved with

1. Le Quy Don (op. cit.).
2. Trinh Hoai Duc (op. cit.).

some minor modifications. These customs were rooted in the people and peculiar to the whole country" <sup>1</sup>.

There were of course local peculiarities: *"This land is inhabited by people coming from different regions, so there is a great diversity in customs"* <sup>2</sup>. However the inhabitants as a whole observed the old customs of Giao Chi".

Thus Vietnamese folklore could be maintained, and it blossomed on the banks of the Mekong river. Besides legends recalling the struggle waged by the Red river people against nature (the Genius of Waters and the Genius of Mountains) and foreign invasion (the Genius of Giong village), and their ancestral customs (betel chewing) the treasury of folklore was enriched by other legends. Typical in this connection is the legend of lord Ban Quy (the kneeling Ban tree). Encircled by the invader, this hero, named Mai Huong, drowned himself in the river by mak-

1. Right at the beginning of the French conquest, captain Gosselin wrote: "We were in the presence of the most united people that can be imagined, from the mountains of Upper Tonkin down to the frontier of Cambodia, from the ethnic as well as the political and social point of view" (*L'Empire d'Annam* — Paris 1904). Geographer Gourou was of the same opinion: "The Vietnamese people's homogeneity is strong and cannot be lessened by minor dialectal differences. They speak the same language, have the same social organization, the same liking for rice growing and the same earth-made houses", (*l'Asie*).

2. Op. cit.

ing a hole in his boat ; in front of the temple erected to him on the river bank, century-old *Ban* trees bend as if to kneel and pay homage to the patriot.

Popular proverbs and sayings of the North and the Centre were transmitted to the South from generation to generation. But the meanings of some words were lost to those who quoted them.

Thus many Southerners did not know the precise meaning of the word "doi" (bowl) in the following proverb :

*One uses only one bowl, one says only one word*  
or

*While only one bowlful of rice is taken only one  
single word is said*

New songs became popular, and some of them expressed the affection and solidarity among compatriots.

*Just as the stream knows how to collect sand on  
the shore  
If we love one another, we should help each other  
to improve ourselves.*

Traditional teachings also took root in the South. According to "*Gia Dinh Thong Chi*" (Monograph of Gia Dinh)<sup>1</sup>, the first Temple of Literature was built on the borderland of *Tran Bien* (Saigon) in 1715. "*Dai Nam Nhat Thong Chi*"<sup>2</sup> relates that under the reign of Thieu Tri (1841-1846) Gia Dinh already had five schools: one at provincial level, and four at

1. Op. cit.

2. Op. cit

district level. There was in Gia Dinh a competition among the "Best Scholars (Khoa Thu Si) to appoint mandarins in 1791, and a regional competition in 1796.

The most outstanding figure in pedagogy was no doubt Vo Truong Toan. This scholar well-known for his knowledge, his selflessness and his progressive teaching, ran a school at the village of Hoa Hung near the present-day Chi Hoa railway station, in Saigon.) *"An intelligent and hard-working man, well versed in classics... To escape the position of mandarin, he lived in retirement to teach... Many of his disciples became famous... Lord Nguyen Anh invited him many times to accept a post of mandarin, but he refused, preferring to keep intact his moral integrity"*<sup>1</sup>

The ethical principle Vo Truong Toan tried to instil into the minds of his disciples could be summed up in these words: *Tri ngon* (Just, exact word) and *Duong Khi* (to keep a will to defend the righteous cause) which were inscribed on his grave<sup>2</sup> where the following could also be read:

*"Since the Master devoted his philosophy to the service of Education, he has been able in his lifetime to train many talented men. Even now his ideas, advice and teaching still inspire the citizens of the Six Provinces*<sup>3</sup>. *Their loyalty and patriotism make them capable of sacrificing even their lives"*.

1. *Dai Nam Nhat Thong Chi*.

2. Erected in 1867.

3. Nam Ky (Cochinchina).



The worship of Master Vo by the population was almost a cult. After the fall of Saigon the three Eastern provinces of Nam Bo passed into French hands, and they transferred his remains to Ba Tri district (Ben Tre). What a moving proof of the national spirit!

The constant national characteristic that underlies the psychology of the people in Gia Dinh does not exclude certain meridional peculiarities. In all countries Southerners differ from Northerners. Geographical and historical juxtaposition also exert their influence in Viet Nam.

In the North floods, inclemencies of weather, the limitations of arable lands render the peasant's life very precarious. Lord Trinh Cuong (1709-1729) acknowledged that in his fief *"the poor had scarcely a square foot of land wherein to plant a peg"*<sup>1</sup>

The Gia Dinh people, living in a fertile land, under a clement sky, and favoured by nature, led an easy and free life, especially in the early days of land reclamation:

*Above immense fields birds can fly swiftly away  
In the sea and ponds fish play in shoals*

was the way one song expressed it.

There is also a saying: "First comes rice then areca"; areca nuts were sold to the Chinese for export at Dong Pho port.

1. Ngo Cao Lang *Lich Trieu Tap Ky* (manuscript in classical Chinese characters in the library of the History Institute, Hanoi).

An easy life, love of freedom, absence of rooted prejudices, and confrontation with a new environment gave the Gia Dinh people a generous and valiant heart and a more or less adventurous spirit, somewhat "quixotic". The Southerner is more open-minded, more spontaneous and more talkative than his northern compatriot<sup>1</sup>, but he remains the equal of his brother in his attachment to moral principles :

*"They love courage and fidelity to principles, respect duty and look down upon money. Their students try to search the meaning of books and are not inclined to rhetoric."*<sup>2</sup>

Trinh Hoai Duc also noticed :

*"Numerous are those who are faithful to the country, valiant and attached to principles, respectful of duties and holding money in contempt ; numerous also are the women motivated by noble inspiration"*<sup>3</sup>

Popular ethics find their expression in the following song :

*Wealth is nothing compared with the man who  
produces it  
What is important is the sincere practice of the  
virtues of humanity and justice.*

1. Here is the opinion of a foreign historian :

"Their features altered, they became taller, their character became... "meridional" with an easy-going and gay manner which reflects the ease of life in that hot, sunbathed and fertile land. The accent has also changed (Philippe Devillers, *Histoire du Viet Nam de 1940 à 1952*).

2. *Dai Nam Nhat Thong Chi*.

3. *Gia Dinh Thong Chi*.

## 5. Under the Feudal Regime

At the start of the period of reclamation of Southern virgin lands, the Nguyen lords showed a certain flexibility in order to encourage pioneer settlers.

*"They were then extremely easy and flexible in ruling over the people. Their principal objective was to have the land tilled and the people attached to it... They left the new settlers free to till the land where they felt it most convenient. The people therefore had full freedom to reclaim what lands they wanted and to establish their dwelling houses and new ricefields, and founded villages at places chosen by themselves. Everyone could freely select lowlying and well watered places for good, big ricefields, if they preferred to settle in elevated sites and set up their so-called ruong go (ricefields on high ground) there<sup>1</sup>.*

Those pioneers worked hard and even hired workers from among national minorities to help in their reclamation work. This form of free enterprise quickly provided an easy living: *"They put in store a large amount of paddy, Some regions had up to 40 or 50 rich families, each with 60 servants, from three to four hundred buffaloes and oxen...*

*Busy working in the fields those families had no rest."*<sup>2</sup>

But the feudal regime had begun to become oppressive in the year 1698, the year in which the

1. *Dai Nam Nhat Thong Chi.*

2. *Phu Bien Thuc Luc.*

Nguyen Lords set up their administrative machinery in Dong Nai. The fiscal regime, the establishment of a cadastral system and of communal ricefields... gave an impulse to agricultural development as well as to a defined class structure.

Mandarins and notables began to practice abuses. Thus Nguyen Cuu Van, a regimental commander, after a victorious expedition against the Siamese, mobilized the peasant manpower of the "*dinh*" of Tran Bien (Gia Dinh) to create for himself a rich rice-growing domain, he ordered them to reclaim the Vung Cu area (now Tan An), dig canals, and grow cereals, under the pretext that the King had given him this right as a military reward<sup>1</sup>.

Many peasants penetrated deep into the Central and Eastern parts of the Mekong Delta to escape oppression and exploitation. The Court of the Nguyen lords became alarmed. Nguyen Cuu Van was punished. The mandarins had to make a tour of the district to give assurances to the settlers and persuade them to return to their old farms. A three-year exemption from taxes and corvees was decreed.

However, the landlord class continued to grow in importance. Many of them, coming from Central provinces (Quang Binh, Thua Thien, and especially

1. These ricefields and canals were called *chau phe*, which means that their appropriation was ratified (*phe*) by the sovereign-lord. Their still exists an arroyo named "chau phe", a "chau phe" landing stage, etc.

from border provinces between Quang Nam and Phu Yen) with their servants, recruited labourers and purchased serfs from among ethnic minorities. They enlarged their domains, gradually encroaching upon the ricefields of the first settlers.

Part of the land exploited by military colonies, mentioned earlier, was granted to the mandarins as rewards.

The feudal yoke became increasingly heavier. According to Le Quy Don, *"Every year, the taxpayer was subjected to increased taxation on a system both complicated and dishonest. The population suffered from a double yoke"*<sup>1</sup> (the State and the landlords-Translator's note).

Ricefields had a high productivity: a hoc<sup>2</sup> of seeds yielded 100 hoc of paddy at Tan Binh and 300 at Dinh Vien. However, since the middle of the 18 th century, famine was endemic. Rice prices rose skyhigh, even at Gia Dinh. The policy of the Nguyen did not succeed in increasing the land under reclamation, instead a recession of the agricultural economy set in in spite of particularly favourable natural conditions. The peasantry became scattered, impoverished and ruined. The economy in general was stagnant, industry and trade came to a standstill<sup>3</sup>.

1. *Phu Bien Tap Luc.*

2. *a hoc equals 44kg.*

3. *Lich su Viet Nam.*

At the end of the 17th century and the beginning of the 18th century, the Nguyen regime in the South as well as the Trinh regime in the North were shaken by a deep and irremediable economic and social crisis. Uprisings took place in various provinces. Peasants formed the bulk of the insurgent troops which also included merchants and highlanders. These movements spread from the southern provinces of Central Viet Nam and finally reached Gia Dinh.

In 1746, the *Cham* (national minority) rose up at Tran Bien (Gia Dinh) at the call of Duong Bao Lai and Diêp Ma Lang, but their revolt had no issue.

In 1747, Ly Van Quang, a merchant of Chinese origin at Dong Pho rebelled against the trade policy of the Nguyen. The insurgents took Dong Pho by surprise and encircled Tran Bien (Gia Dinh) killing the kings' representative. Although they were driven back at Dong Pho, and Ly Van Quang and 57 of his men were executed, their action was approved by the mass of the people at Gia Dinh.

The revolt which rallied the majority of peasants all over South Viet Nam broke out in 1779 in the village of Tay Son (Binh Dinh province). The three Nguyen brothers who headed it "*preached equality in everything... These forerunners of modern socialism' deprived the mandarins and rich people of their properties and distributed them to the poor. Villages which had been up to then crushed under*

*exorbitant tributes, hastened to take their oath"*  
(*Testimony of a Spanish missionary at that time*)<sup>1</sup>

Nguyen Hue, the most brilliant of the three brothers, revealed himself as a strategist and politician of genius.

After conquering Trung Bo, the Tay Son army entered Gia Dinh which then became a bitter battlefield. They returned there in 1777, 1782, 1783 and 1785, each time to reactivate the elements re-assembled after the departure of the remnants of the Nguyen troops. But, they always withdrew to their Qui Nhon base afterwards, leaving only a small garrison at Gia Dinh. After 1778, Nguyen Anh, heir to the Nguyen, undertook the conduct of the war with the support of French and Portuguese colonialists and Siamese feudalists, and the backing of the landlords in the country. The latter—for instance Do Thanh Nhon at Dong Son (Central Nam Bo), Mac Thien Tich at Ha Tien—recruited troops and provided their supply.

As for the people they joined the Tay Son.

Nguyen Anh succeeded once in retaking Gia Dinh. A counter-offensive by Nguyen Hue in 1783 drove him away and compelled him to take refuge in Phu Quoc Island. Nguyen Anh called to his rescue the King of Siam who sent him 20,000 men<sup>2</sup> with 300 ships under the command of Chieu Nang

1. Quoted by Jean Chesneaux in *Contribution à l'histoire de la nation vietnamienne*, 1955.

2. 50,000 according to other documents.

and Chieu Suong, members of his own family. The enemy invaded the western part of the Mekong Delta in 1784 and ransacked the occupied zone. Early 1785, Nguyen Hue hurried to the South with new forces. Simulating a retreat at first he then drew the Siamese fleet into an ambush on My Tho river, at the Rach Gam—Xoai Mut section. The Siamese army was completely routed. 2000 men managed to escape to the West by land. This was on January 25, 1785. Historiographers of the Nguyen dynasty had to admit: "*After the defeat of the year Giap Thin (1785) the Siamese continued to brag, but in fact were as afraid of the Tay Son as of tigers*"<sup>1</sup>.

Nguyen Anh then asked for French aid. He took advantage of a dispute between the three brothers Huê, Nhac and Lu of the Tay Son to grab hold of Gia Dinh in 1788. Nguyen Hue, was at the time busy in the North, and could not intervene.

The weakening of the Tay Son following Nguyen Hue's death<sup>2</sup> and the internal dissension in the movement enabled Nguyen Anh to mount the throne in 1802, inaugurating a reactionary dynasty which spread misery among the people.

Under the reign of the first three kings from 1802 to 1846, 365 separate peasant revolts<sup>3</sup> were

1. *Dai Nam Thuc Luc Chinh Bien*.

2. He died in 1792 under the name of "King Quang Trung"

3. *Dai Nam Thuc Luc Chinh Bien*— Under Gia Long (1802-1820): 73, under Ming Mang (1820-1840): 234, under Thieu Tri (1840-1846): 58.



recorded in official Annals, in particular at Gia Dinh. In 1821, the *Dynastic History* (Quoc Trieu Chinh Bien) had to admit.

*"The region of Gia Dinh is rife with pirates (read rebellious peasants — Translator's note). His Majesty tells the Court: Gia Dinh has always trembled under Governor Le Van Duyệt's authority. Why then does the number of pirates keep on increasing? General Nguyen Van Nhan replies: This land covered with forests and marshes favours the rapid multiplication of pirates."*

The most resounding revolt in Gia Dinh was the one led by Le Van Khoi, commander of the Guards (Ve quan). As his adoptive father Le Van Duyet<sup>1</sup>, governor of Gia Dinh, had been liquidated by King Minh Mang for reasons of personal hatred, Khoi, with the assistance of his friends, entered into a coalition with soldiers formerly deported from the North. In June 1833, he succeeded in taking Gia Dinh Citadel and all lands along the Mekong River. So long as he fought against the rotten regime he could enlist the peasants' support. But as soon as it was realized that some of Khoi's officers were working hand in glove with the landlords, and that Khôi himself had some suspect Catholic missionaries as advisers and was seeking an alliance with the Siamese, peasants began to defect. In 1835 King Ming Mang's troops reoccupied Gia Dinh. The "Golden Citadel" was razed to the ground.

1. His grave is still in Saigon.

The population of Gia Dinh nevertheless continued a sporadic struggle against the impotent Hue Court which took no care of the people's or the nation's interests.

In 1859 Gia Dinh was encircled by the French invaders. A new page was turned in the history of Viet Nam.

## NOTES ON THE ORIGIN OF SAIGON

Was Saigon the phonetic transcription of some aboriginal, Vietnamese, Chinese, Khmer word whose meaning has been lost as time passed by ?

The most acceptable hypothesis is based on the words « cay goong » or « cay gon », the Vietnamese name of the ceiba tree which yields the fibre Kapok.

*Its present name of Saigon, affirms Brebion in the "Revue Indochinoise", (1911) comes from the number of ceiba trees surrounding the old earth built fortifications. "Saigon" is a word borrowed from a Chinese character which means "Wood" and "gon" is the Annamese name of the quarter"*<sup>1</sup>

According to Madrolle's « Manuel du Voyageur en Indochine du Sud » (Handbook of the traveller in South Indochina), the name "*Saigon, wood of ceiba trees*" was already used in the 18th century in the letters of missionaries. This hypothesis however does not seem very convincing for reasons of syntax : if Saigon is to be translated into "wood of ceiba trees", the order of words should be inverted into Gon +

1. André Surmer : "Saigon is the distortion of the Annamese word *Cay Gon*" (Ceiba tree), *Indochine Review*, Jan. 2, 1941.

Sai, - moreover compound words formed by a Sino-Vietnamese element (Sai) and a Vietnamese element (gon) are extremely rare. Lastly, semantically "sai" means *timber* and not wood.

According to Pham Thieu and Ca Van Thinh<sup>1</sup> the word "cay gon" became "thay ngon" in the pronunciation of Chinese from Kwangtung province. Pronounced in the Cantonese fashion, *thay ngon* (in Sino-Vietnamese de ngan: dam + embankment) means "Urban centre near the dam, on the bank of a river". The original meaning is thus completely distorted.

Another hypothesis tries to link Saigon with the Khmer word *Preikor*.

In this last instance, one wonders why the Southern Chinese had to transcribe Saigon into "*Tay cong*" if the reasons were purely phonetic.

In any case it is clear that the etymology of "Saigon" deserves deeper study.

1. *Saigon, Ho Chi Minh city* (Chapter I) published by the Liaison Committee of Saigonese fellow-countrymen. Hanoi, 1972.

# **From the French Conquest to 1930**

*DINH XUAN LAM*

## **1 — Saigon under the French Occupation**

### **1. Saigon, a Strategic Position.**

At the beginning of the contemporary history of Viet Nam, Saigon and its periphery held a key position in the economic field and even more so in the military field.

83 kilometres from the sea, Saigon is safe from all surprise attacks and can efficiently cope with landing operations. It commands many strategic waterways such as the Nha Be, the Saigon river, Soai Rao, Long Tau, Dong Nai rivers, and is surrounded and defended on three sides by water. The Thi Nghe<sup>1</sup> and Cho Soi<sup>2</sup> channels and the Saigon River stretch their protective arms around the city. Near the city, the hills slope gently towards

1. Called Avalanche Channel by the French.

2. Called Chinese Channel by the French.

the river, situated favourably for the building of defensive works. The fortifications which commanded the Dong Nai and Song Be, leaned against the Bien Hoa citadel on the outer side, preventing all attack from the Saigon river and the eastern and western Vam Co rivers. Saigon was thus a rampart for eastern Nam Bo (former Cochinchina).

Roads led to Cambodia and southern Trung Bo. The rivers flowing from the northwest and northeast were favourable to navigation.

Lying in the heart of a most fertile rice-growing region<sup>1</sup>, the city was in a position to satisfy its own regiments with food in time of war; in this respect Admiral Rigault de Genouilly wrote in 1862:

"Saigon lies on a river navigable to our war corvettes and transports. After landing, our troops would be ready for immediate attacks; it would thus not be necessary for them to move on foot or to bring along foodstuffs. Such an operation would be quite within their capacity. I am at a loss to know whether Saigon is or is not well defended as the reports made by the missionaries regarding the place are confused and contradictory... Anyhow Saigon is the rice granary which partially feeds Hue and the Annamite<sup>2</sup> army; this rice is due to

1. "The country is magnificently rich in all kinds of products: rice, cotton, sugar, tobacco, timber; as the river is linked with the hinterland by many waterways, there would be there an inexhaustible resource" (Rigault de Genouilly).

2. Pejorative term for "Vietnamese".

be carried to the North in March. We must stop that rice..."

(Revue maritime et coloniale, 1862)

It is worth noticing however that the defence advantages enjoyed by Saigon were truly effective only when the war was of a feudal type. In modern warfare, the military importance of the city is greatly reduced by the introduction of modern men-of-war and weapons. It was all the more vulnerable against an obdurate adversary, since the regular army of the Nguyen, a badly officered mercenary army, fought without popular support.

The events in 1859 are an illustration.

## **2. Between Da Nang and Saigon,**

Let us recall that in his attempts to usurp power from the Tay Son dynasty which had been set up after the great popular insurrection at the end of the 18th century, Nguyen Anh, the feudal overlord in the south, appealed for help from the French, thus opening the door to imperialist penetration. In 1802, he made himself emperor under the name of Gia Long.

The Nguyen dynasty (1802-1945) carried out a most reactionary policy of outright exploitation of the population, bloody repression, deliberate obscurantism and the systematic sacrifice of national interests to the interest of the dynasty.

For the French, a weakened Viet Nam, torn by civil wars, was natural prey in Southeast Asia and a road of penetration into China. South Viet Nam territory was the bridgehead necessary for the conquest of all Viet Nam and indeed of the whole of Indochina.

The Franco-Spanish expedition against China in 1858 was a favourable occasion for Napoleon the Third to intervene in Viet Nam. The pretext was that the French wanted to obtain guarantee of safety for the French and European missionaries. As the operation against Da Nang proved more or less a failure, Admiral Rigault de Genouilly left a small contingent of troops for the garrison there, and sent the bulk of his forces to the south, to Saigon and Nam Bo (Cochinchina), the rice granary. His aim was to occupy Saigon as a springboard for further advance up the Mekong river, to seize control over Cambodia and if possible Siam; then to steal a march on the British—the traditional enemy of the French in colonial conquests—who even now were covetously eying Saigon and Siam while taking Singapore and Hongkong.

On February 9, 1859, at day-break, a French squadron bombarded Phuc Thang stronghold on top of Mount Lai Son<sup>1</sup>. The beaten earth ramparts at Luong Thien (Bien Hoa), Phuc My, Danh Nghia (Gia Dinh) were breached. Two French naval sloops entered Can Gio river and shelled the watch towers

1. Ganh Rai, now in Baria province.



on its banks. Wherever they went, the enemy troops spread confusion, ruin and mourning<sup>1</sup>.

But as soon as they advanced, they met with the resistance of the garrisons who planted stakes and other obstacles in the river bed and sniped at any enemy soldiers who jumped into water to remove them :

"The annamites defended themselves stubbornly, their shots were accurate ; 'La Dragonne' was hit by three shells, 'l'Avalance' by seven".

(A. Thomazi — *La Conquête de l'Indochine*,  
Paris, 1934)

On February 15, 1859, two French ships approached the Tau Hu junction (linking Cho Lon to Gia Dinh). Two important fortresses built on the banks of the Ben Nghe river took up the defence. The river was obstructed with a system of stakes from bank to bank, embankments, and junks were loaded

1. Poet Nguyen Dinh Chieu, a great patriot, wrote the following poem on this occasion :

'The market scatters. The guns clatter.

The tables are turned : the chess-game stops at mate,  
suspended on the crucial moment.

Their nests shattered, the birds fly off in despair.

All the rich properties along Ben Nghe dissolve,

like the bubbles.

Clouds of ash settle over the roofs, thatch and tile at

Dong Nai.

Oh, where is the national saviour who will defeat the

invader ?

Will you leave the common people in this predicament ?

with gunpowder and straw, ready to burst into flame.

The French boats, intercepted by the ordnance pieces based on our fortresses, stopped advancing. After dark, motor boats were sent to remove the obstacles. On the morning of February 16, the enemy vessels counter-attacked our fortresses, lobbing shells into them at point blank range and finally occupying them after the withdrawal of the royal troops.

The road to Gia Dinh was opened to traffic. Enemy ships cast anchor in front of that square citadel of 475 metres each side, surrounded by high ramparts and deep moats, south of Thi Nghe arroyo; the citadel was defended by 1000 soldiers, well armed and having a sufficient quantity of food to sustain a siege. But its commander, Vo Duy Ninh, had sufficient vigilance and initiative. When the French arrived, all he did was to keep sending dispatches to Hue and asking for reinforcements from neighbouring provinces.

On the morning of February 17, 1859, the French sloops sprang an attack and French troops landed at noon. Incapable of withstanding their assault the commander of the citadel evacuated it, leaving behind a great quantity of weapons and food capable of sustaining an army of 6000-8000 men for one year.

To prevent any attempt at reconquest, the French immediately burned the food stocks and then destroyed the citadel which they evacuated on

## FROM THE...

March 8. By way of further precaution, they set up a watch-post on the river bank and withdrew to their ships which were anchored in mid-stream. "Had the forces under my command not been so small, I could have taken the citadel and the town. but this was not open to me", Rigault de Genouilly admitted later<sup>1</sup>.

As the situation at the Da Nang garrison went from bad to worse, the enemy rushed to the rescue leaving only a small force at Gia Dinh. Ton That Hiep, in charge of the Gia Dinh front, did not take advantage of the occasion to launch an offensive but merely built defence works and took a "wait and see" attitude.

While the strategists of the royal court lost all initiative and the soldiers their zeal, the people's grim determination to oppose the invaders grew after the first attack against Gia Dinh — Saigon. Such patriots as Tran Thien Chinh and Le Huy mustered 6000 volunteers among the country people and waged a stubborn guerilla war against the French.

In a well-known funeral oration<sup>2</sup> poet Nguyen Dinh Chieu extolled these humble heroic fighters of the early years of struggle :

"Hard and lonely was your life of toil :

"Misery, poverty, and cares.

Strangers to the drilling square, to horses,

You had never been under soldiers' discipline.

1. Thomazi (A). Op. cit.

2. See footnote page 14.

All life long your hands had handled the pick,  
the plough and the harrow; yours was the art  
of transplanting young rice,  
As for the art of holding the shield, the gun, the  
sword, the flag...

Your eyes had never seen such things<sup>1</sup>.

These farmers fought like lions despite their  
inferiority in armaments and ignorance of all  
military practice:

As weapons you had only sharpened bamboos, all  
you needed was a hatchet and a battle helmet.

With a brand of twisted straw you set fire to the  
lair of the traitors

No officers to sound the attack, you simply came  
with choppers to dispatch the lieutenants of  
the enemy

By yourselves you broke through the stockades  
overcoming all obstacles, to go into the attack.

Fearing neither cannon balls nor bullets, you  
broke through the gates into the enemy posts  
regardless of danger to your lives,

Once among them you hit them left and right till  
the mercenaries broke ranks and fled mad with  
fear

Like waves, you advanced shouting defiance to  
the metal ships whose guns boomed an echo  
from the flood.

1. Funeral oration in honour of Can Duoc militiamen  
fallen in the fierce battle on Dec. 14, 1861.

At the end of March 1860, Page who replaced Rigauld de Genouilly, concentrated them at Gia Dinh — Saigon, in order not to scatter them on two fronts, and tried to expand from there his zone of occupation. The French troops advanced along the channel linking Xom Chieu to Xom Cui and took Cay Mai pagoda, southwest of Cholon. At Gia Dinh, they set up a post on the river bank, occupied Truong Thi and built an outer defence line running from Khai Tuong<sup>1</sup> pagoda, to Cay Mai, passing through Cho Duoi<sup>2</sup> pagoda, and Cho Ray<sup>3</sup>. Cho Ray also became a battlefield on the night of July 3-4, 1860, attacked by 2000 volunteers of Lam Binh Thang. At Khai Tuong padoga, the insurrectionists laid an ambush in which Captain Barbé was killed (December 18, 1860). On January 1, 1861, The "Primauguet" which anchored on the Dong Nai was sunk by our militia. As admitted even by the invaders, the attacks of our snipers inside Saigon, (such as setting fire to barracks, coups de mains), caused heavy losses to them.

### 3. Fall of Saigon and the People Resistance.

The Court of Viet Nam was given a new chance to oust the aggressors, but it did not know how to

1. Also called Barbé pagoda.

2. Cho Duoi or Hien Truong pagoda, also called Mares Pagoda.

3. Cho Ray or Kim Phuoc pagoda, also called Clochetons pagoda.

make use of the opportunity; in fact, the bulk of the French forces at Gia Dinh was sent off to North China to cope with new developments there, and the enemy garrison numbering only 1000 men was spread thin on a fragile defence line of 10 kilometres long.

General Nguyen Tri Phuong<sup>1</sup> sent from Da Nang, still preferred a defensive strategy despite his numerical superiority. He hurriedly recruited manpower to build the big defence post of Chi Hoa, southwest of Saigon in preparation for an eventual attack. Twelve kilometres long, the new work was surrounded by a wall of clay and hardened laterite 3.5 metres high and 2 metres thick. All around the compound bristling with stakes and defended by moats was a bamboo hedge. From that big post divided into five sectors to the enemy position at Cay Mai pagoda, opposite Thi Nghe canal, there were also two lines of trenches and walls bristling with fortified posts.

The resumption of hostilities with the French was not late in coming. After the victorious campaign of the Western powers against China<sup>2</sup>, the French

1. 1799-1873, born at Phong Dien district (Thua Thien province), defender of Da Nang, Gia Dinh, then Hanoi where he died in 1873.

2. The Peking Treaty signed on October 25, 1860 which crowned that victory ratified the Tien Tsin Treaty (1858): 11 new ports were opened for trading with the West, the missionaries were allowed free rein in the country. China agreed to maintain normal "diplomatic relations" with the West.

were able to spearhead all their naval forces in the Far East against Gia Dinh, totalling then 4,000 men and 50 war vessels.

On February 24, 1861, at daybreak, Admiral Charner sprang an attack against the big post of Chi Hoa. Despite two days of stubborn resistance by the royal troops backed by the population, the battle was won by the besiegers: they had artillery which could easily pound a heavy garrison crowded in an isolated beaten earth citadel. Finally Nguyen Tri Phuong and his troops had to dig in in Thuan Kieu post, behind the outer defences.

The enemy lost three hundred men including many field officers. They had to cope with constant harassment by thousands of militiamen who assaulted newly set up posts and stepped up raids in Gia Dinh area (Saigon, Cholon), as the French expanded and took Dinh Tuong on April 12, 1861, Bien Hoa on February 17, 1861 and Vinh Long on March 23, 1862.

"The defeats of the Annamite army did not affect the insurrectional state of the occupied zone" (*Histoire militaire de l'Indochine*" by a group of French officers). "The fact is that the resistance centre was everywhere, subdivided *ad infinitum* nearly as many times as there were living Annamese. It would be more exact to consider each peasant who was fastening a sheaf of rice plants as a centre of resistance.<sup>1</sup>

1. Leopold Pallu de la Barrière, *Histoire de l'Expedition de la Cochinchine en 1861*, Paris Nancy, 1888.

The people's forces commanded by the patriot Nguyen Trung Truc<sup>1</sup> set fire to "l'Espérance" (1861) and inflicted on the French an ignominious defeat at Nhat Tao. Despite the defection of the royal troops, the popular resistance intensified. It was led by Truong Dinh (1820-1864), native of a village in Quang Ngai — Son My, whose name became known the world over a century later (1967) after the whole-sale massacre by American troops that took place there. Truong Dinh was head of a community at the time of the Saigon attack. After the loss of the town, he withdrew to Go Cong, 50 kilometres to the south and set up an operational base there. The activities of his guerillas compelled Charner to declare martial law all over the occupied territory and particularly the Saigon — Cholon area, from May 19, 1861.

On the night of April 6, 1862, the insurrectional troops attacked Cholon, burned many enemy's installations between Rach Soi and Cay Mai pagoda and stormed the post at Cho Duoi pagoda. At the end of the month, together with their Chinese friends, the Vietnamese cooks tried to poison the French officers in Saigon.

It was the Court of Hue which took a defeatist view and helped the invaders to get out of the impasse they were in: on June 5, 1862, it appointed Phan Thanh Gian to sign a treaty with Admiral

1. Captured in 1868, he cried before being killed by the firing squad: "So long as grass grows on this soil, there will remain people to resist the invaders."



Bonard conceding the three eastern provinces in Nam Bo (Cochinchina) to France.

The popular forces soon received orders to evacuate the territory. But "at a time when the admiral thought the war was at an end, hostilities grew more intense instead, fiercer indeed than a regular war against the royal troops would have been" (P. Vial: *Les premières années de la Cochinchine française*). The Vietnamese people did not lay down their arms.

Truong Dinh, who had recruited 6,000 volunteers, was cunningly appointed deputy-commander by the Court. As a Confucian bound by ethical laws requiring blind obedience to the King, he was in a dilemma: should he continue the fighting in defiance or leave Go Cong and withdraw to An Giang province, as ordered by the King? The delegates of the people's army and of the population came and adjured him to take the command of the movement and proclaimed him "Binh Tay Dai Nguyen soai" (General, great pacifier of the French).

The resistance went on; "With weapons powerless against our carbines, the Annamites rushed on our men with blind energy which showed extraordinary courage and selflessness." (P. Vial) <sup>1</sup>

"There is no gloomier, more monotonous, more tedious scene than that beheld by the French on land or sea. One of our adversaries is always in sight, the other is hidden. As the enemy persistently

1. *Les premières années de la Cochinchine française.*

avoids a set battle, it seems that we can only strike in a vacuum." (Pallu de la Barrière) <sup>1</sup>

Guerrilla warfare was in full swing. In April 1863, returning from Hue where he attended the signing of the treaty of the royal surrender, the commander-in-chief of French troops received from Truong Dinh a letter condemning the massacres perpetrated by the French in the areas under their control and demanding the return of the three provinces conceded. The calls to arms were stepped up in Gia Dinh although the area was then subjected to a tight control. The resistance forces appointed the patriotic scholar Ho Huan Nghiep as head of Tan Binh district (a division of ancient Saigon) to rally manpower and resources.

The better to defend Saigon, Bonard proposed to dig a moat of 20 kilometres around the town, in effect turning it into an island. For this work, he impressed 40,000 "coolies" in a series of round-ups throughout the three provinces under French control. His enterprise failed because of the opposition of the population. About this time the "movement of refugees" was started. Scholars, freedom loving people, notables unwilling "to live under the same sky as the enemy" went and settled in the free western provinces. Despite his blindness, Nguyen Dinh Chieu (1822-1888), the most popular poet in Nam Bo, retired to Ba Tri (Ben Tre province) to finish his days, meanwhile keeping in close contact with the great leader Truong Dinh, and putting his

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1. Op. cit.

literary talent to work for the Fatherland like other patriotic scholars. In his exodus even the dead were evacuated: thus early in 1867, the remains of Vo Truong Toan, a well-known schoolmaster at Hoa Hung, one of the cultural centres of Saigon (near the present Chi Hoa station) were also transferred by his disciples to Ben Tre.

In 1864, Truong Dinh was wounded in battle, and killed himself. His son Truong Quyen assumed the command of his forces.

In an attempt to please the French, however, the Court dispersed the insurrectional troops in the West, forbade all military assistance to the resisters and even delivered some of their leaders to the French. This did not prevent the latter, once they had settled their troubles in Mexico, from annexing the remaining three Western provinces in Nam Bo (1867).

Once again, the Court of Hue bowed while the inhabitants continued to resist: the popular movement was again brewing in Saigon-Cholon. Up to 1885, there were still rumours of the rebellion of poor people in Saigon under the command of the butcher Nguyen Van Buong (De Buong).

## **II — Modernization and the Socio-political Agitations up to 1930**

### **1. Birth of a Colonial City.**

Soon after the occupation of Saigon, the French conceived a notion of turning it into a permanent

base for their colonial policy in Asia and a military, political and economic centre for their future ambitions in Viet Nam and Indochina.

Admiral Bonard dreamed of building it into a city of 500,000 souls. His plan from the outset was opposed by the inhabitants who carried out a policy of "scorched earth" at the same time as the "refugees' movement" mentioned above. Before its occupation, Saigon (an agglomeration of 40 villages totalling 40,000 inhabitants) was, with Cholon (20 villages and 40,000 inhabitants) a thriving commercial centre, visited by the ships and junks of foreign countries. After the outbreak of the aggressive war in 1859, the inhabitants destroyed their houses and gardens, evacuating the areas occupied by the enemy and joined the free zone. In 1863, one year after the concession to the French of the three eastern provinces (including Gia Dinh), Saigon was reduced to an area of 8000 souls, became overgrown with bushes and weeds, and was sometimes even haunted by tigers.

However, with the later mushrooming of urban centres, the population increased rapidly and again reached the same figure as in 1864. Excluding the 6,000 Chinese (traders) and Indians (breeders and coachmen), Saigon counted 40,000 inhabitants in 1865. Commerce at that time was thriving. In 1883, when the French conquest of Viet Nam was complete, the population of Saigon—Cholon reached 100,000 inhabitants, of whom a major part (skilled workers and labourers) served in construction and in other productive activities.

Particular attention was paid to the management of the port of Saigon chiefly for the exploitation of new land in Dong Nai. Five days after the occupation of Saigon (February 23, 1859), Rigault de Genouilly reduced the customs duty by 50%, opened the port to foreign merchant ships; and issued export licences for rice.

Using cynical methods of exploitation, his successor, Bonard, restored all the royal taxes and duties including polltax, reopened gambling houses and opium dens and took drastic agrarian measures against the resisters: all lands, including those of absentees, were declared the property of the French administration; and according to the decree of February 25, 1864, these could be sold or leased without consulting the previous owner. Of course, the beneficiaries were the colonists or their native lackeys.

Saigon had a shipyard, Ba Son, built at the end of the 18th century to build sea-going junks used in the transport of the troops of Nguyen Anh (who later became Gia Long, the first king of the Nguyen) to Trung Bo to fight the Tay Son. In 1864, the French enlarged Ba Son and turned it into an important arsenal for the repair-yard for war-vessels and weapons used in their operations in the Far East.

The same year saw the construction of a wharf 1800 metres long and 4.2 metres deep for the accommodation of ships of deep draught.

A big market was erected at the confluence of the Rach Soi river; canals were dug or dredged and new roads were built.

The port of Saigon witnessed a new development in 1862, when it received 111 ships from Europe and 144 from other countries (some of them as big as 8,000 — 10,000 ton) which called there before going on to Hongkong or Singapore. Exports included rice, dried fish, cotton, copra, silk, sugar, buffalo and cow hide, horn, ivory, feathers...

The interests of French capitalism began to develop in Saigon and the provinces. Saw mills, husking mills, sugar refineries, and distilleries competed dangerously with the traditional handicrafts. The rice exported through Saigon amounted to 192,887 tons in 1867 and 510,495 tons ten years later. This attracted a great number of foreign merchant ships: 403 ships in 1877 (of which 235 were British, 41 German, 86 French) not including Chinese junks.

Economic exploitation was harsher and harsher as the conquerors had to defray the cost of their wars of aggression. Rice husking was particularly developed. Two factories equipped with steam engines were opened in Saigon and 7 at Cholon; the biggest of which had a capacity of 350 HP. A railway line linked Saigon to Cholon and My Tho. In 1892, foreign trade in Saigon amounted to

116,250,000 francs, of which 75 million derived from the export of rice.

French military governors (Admirals Charner, Bonard, Lagrandière...) and civil governors (the first being Le Myre de Villers) set up their HQ in Saigon, which also became a centre for the training of "collaborators" and for colonial propaganda. Many schools were opened: the Interpreters' School, the Scholars' School, the Franco-Vietnamese religious schools. 1862 saw the installation of printing-houses, publishing houses and the first issues of local newspapers. Two papers in Vietnamese, the *Gia Dinh Bao* (Gia Dinh Journal, 1865) and the *Nhat Trinh Nam Ky* (the Nam Ky Daily, 1883) produced in order to sing the praises of the colonial regime. The French papers such as *Le Courrier de Saigon* (1864) and *L'Indépendant* called for aggression against North Viet Nam.

Great changes became apparent in Vietnamese society in Saigon and the South generally. The feudalists and landlords worked hand in glove with the occupying authorities. Many of them took part in the rural administration. At Saigon-Cholon and other urban centres, the bourgeoisie and petty-bourgeoisie, still scarcely developed and not yet sufficiently politically conscious, were licked into shape. Meanwhile, the workers still closely linked with the peasantry began to seek jobs in the factories owned by French, Chinese and even Vietnamese masters.

## 2. Saigon and the Initial Exploitation of Land.

Throughout Viet Nam, the strong resistance of the peasants under the leadership of the scholars, grew weaker and weaker and finally died out by the end of the 19th century. Towards 1900, as the "pacification" period ended, the colonial regime began to stabilize. Viet Nam, Cambodia and Laos were at this time being subjected to what was called "initial development", systematically carried out at accelerated speed under the guidance of Paul Doumer, Governor General of Indochina. It included three key points: establishment of a very tight fiscal system; purchase of mechanical equipment in conjunction with the development of communication lines, and expansion of colonial agriculture, commerce and industry.

The communication system in the Saigon — Cholon area certainly profited by this expansion. Canals were dug or dredged (Cho Gao and Rach Chanh channels), roads were built (Saigon — Hue — Hanoi; Saigon — Tay Ninh — Phnom Penh), great bridges were built (Saigon bridge, Ong Lanh bridge). The railway section between Saigon and Nha Trang was opened in 1910.

River and sea transport companies made their appearance. The Saigon — Go Vap — Hoc Mon tramcar line began to operate in 1913.

French capital was invested in many new enterprises: saw-mills, soap, coconut oil, ice, canned foods, cane sugar.



Despite this competition, the Vietnamese bourgeois managed to set up smaller enterprises for rice milling, printing, soap making, tanning and dyeing. The Nam Dong Huong stores were opened for the sale of home-made goods.

The proletariat grew in number: 3000 workers worked in the Saigon—Cholon rice mills, 1000 at Ba Son shipyard, 500 at the French distilleries, not to mention the dockers, transport workers, and trading agents.

The growth of the proletariat soon aroused anxiety within the colonial administration. In 1902, Henri de Lamothe, Governor of Cochinchina, wrote to Paul Doumer:

"The development of big centres such as Saigon and Cholon has given birth to a kind of urban and suburban proletariat whose attitude and activities cause serious and legitimate concern to the European population and the more prosperous class of natives."<sup>1</sup>

The strata of the petty bourgeoisie also swelled in number: small traders, handicraft work-shop's owners, school teachers, functionaries.

This nation-wide social restructuring was reflected in the ideological field. As Confucianism had failed to inspire the first stage of the struggle against the French, at the beginning of the 20th century the leadership of the patriotic movement was

1. « Notes sur la situation de la Cochinchine de 1897 à 1901 » (Appendix to Governor General Paul Doumer's report).

subsequently taken over by modernist scholars. These assimilated certain bourgeois democratic notions, along with Western methods of industrial and scientific development, through Chinese translations of European books. Japan's victory in 1905 over Czarist Russia gave strong encouragement to that movement which became polarized in armed violence with Japanese assistance (Phan Boi Chau) on the one hand and reformism (School of the Just Cause or Dong Kinh Nghia Thuc, set up in 1907 in Hanoi, Duy Tan or Renovation movement in Trung Ky) on the other. The influence of these parties spread swiftly throughout Cochinchina.

From abroad, Phan Boi Chau called for the sending of students "to the East" (to Japan). In July 1907, after meeting him in Hongkong, a Saigonese personality named Tran Chanh Chieu returned to the southern capital to establish with Nguyen Thanh Ut the Minh Tan Cong Nghe Xa, liaison and finance centre of the Dong Du (Studies in Japan) in Cochinchina. A big fund was raised. But the collusion between the French and the Japanese government in 1909 put an end to the Dong Du movement.

Phan Boi Chau went to China where he founded the League "Viet Nam Quang Phuc Hoi" (League for the Reconquest of Independence for Viet Nam), an organization of republican tendency which had two Saigonese, Nguyen Than Hien and Dang Binh Thanh, on its staff.

The progressive press also made its appearance in Saigon. The first private paper printed in Vietnamese—Nong Co Min dam (Talks on Agriculture

FROM THE...

and Trade)—appeared in 1901. The *Luc Tinh Tan Van* (Six Provinces Journal) appearing in 1907 carried some articles against the colonial regime; one of these articles even hailed the attack of an insurrectionist group at Rach Gia.

More important still was the workers' struggle carried out simultaneously in the north and the centre of the country. The first big demonstration staged by the workers and apprentices in Saigon-Cholon took place in 1912 and was attended by Ton Duc Thang, student of the Saigon Practical Industrial School, now President of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam.

It was in that seething political atmosphere that the young Nguyen Tat Thanh (Ho Chi Minh) aged 21, embarked from Saigon in 1911 for other lands in search of a way to national salvation.

### **3. From World War I to the "Second Development" of Indochina.**

During World War I (1914-1918) France tried to exploit to the utmost the natural and human resources of Indochina to support her own military demands. Viet Nam, Cambodia and Laos had to contribute 50,000 soldiers, 49,000 labourers, 336,000 tons of foods and 184,000,000 piastres in the form of a loan.

The Ba Son shipyard in Saigon, enlarged and better equipped, was capable of repairing 95-metre ships at the end of the war. A 4,200-ton cargo boat

was built there in 1918. The André Grillet company installed an iron casting shop. The Saigon Practical Industrial School trained workers for arms manufacturers in France while turning out also shellcases for the European war. The Industrial and Forest Service produced acetate and acetone for the French Navy. During the war years, "Allied" ships cruising in the Far East frequently called at Saigon.

The new period of economic expansion brought about a new expansion of population in urban centres. A class-conscious proletariat began to take shape in some key branches such as ship building and the chemical and explosives industry.

In his book "Les sociétés secrètes en Terre d'Annam" (Saigon 1926) Georges Coulet spoke of the role of the Saigonese working class in the riots in the city and particularly in the secret societies which mushroomed in 1911 in the countryside of East Cochinchina. In March 1913, the Thien Dia Hoi (Sky and Earth Society), the best known of these organizations, distributed leaflets and suddenly hundreds of armed militiamen dressed in white, wearing white turbans and amulets, stormed Cholon. Their leader, ex-bonze Phan Phat Sanh, alias Phan Xich Long, who declared himself emperor of Viet Nam was arrested by the French. In 1915 and 1916, the members of other secret societies attacked the seats of the rural administration, burned the files, captured notables, wiped out recruiting officers, destroyed prisons... On the night of Feb. 14-15, 1916, after sporadic uprisings, the Thien Dia Hoi members broke into Saigon and attacked the residence of

FROM THE...

the Governor of Cochinchina and the Central Prison (in the hope of freeing Phan Xich Long). The insurrection was drowned in blood: about forty men were condemned to death, one hundred received prison sentences. Thus ended a period of inadequately led and badly organized armed struggle.

After World War I, France was in need of capital and raw materials for her economic restoration. Thus Indochina experienced for one decade a "second period of development" worked out by Governor General Albert Sarraut.

The capital of the Banque de l'Indochine rose from 48 to 72 million piastres, that of the Credit Foncier from 6 million (in 1923) to 50 million (in 1925). The French State invested 426 million francs from 1896 to 1914, and the private sector 500 million from 1888 to 1920; this investment totalled 4000 million in six years (1924-1929). In Cochinchina, important concessions were granted to French companies for the establishment of rubber plantations.

The administrative machine greatly increased in size, as is reflected in its budget which rose to 96 million francs in 1922 (against 12,791,000 francs in 1911). 70% of this was reserved for the payment of French officials. The social restructuring which began in the period of the "first development" was accelerated in post-war years. The bourgeoisie, and even more the petty bourgeoisie, were strengthened. The proletariat became a politically-conscious class.

#### 4. Forms of Modern Struggle.

International events (The Russian Revolution in October 1917, the national movements in India, Indonesia, Egypt, new developments in China, the foundation of the French Communist Party in 1920) exerted a great influence on Vietnamese society during this formative period. From the twenties, the country was shaken by a new national movement which adopted modern forms and techniques of struggle.

In Saigon, the bourgeoisie, though inconsistent, began nevertheless to make its existence felt. In 1923, it succeeded in thwarting a project conceding an import-export monopoly to a French company. The same year saw the formation of the "Constitutional Party" which recruited its members chiefly among former high officials who had grown rich by growing rice and had become jealous of their privileges.

The most effective struggle was waged, however, by the urban petty bourgeoisie and even more by the working class. Saigon, was the cradle of the progressive press, and set an example to the rest of the country. Two organs written in French, *La Cloche Fêlée*<sup>1</sup> (The Cracked Bell) and *l'Annam*<sup>2</sup>

1. Paper appearing in 1923 and edited by Nguyen An Ninh, an intellectual who returned from France and imbued with the ideal of the 1789 French Revolution.

2. Appearing in 1926 and edited by lawyer Phan Van Truong.

reprinted some articles from *l'Humanité*<sup>1</sup>. They reproduced in full the Communist Party Manifesto of Marx and Engels and many pro-Soviet articles. In the *Jeune Annam*<sup>2</sup>, the *Nha Que*<sup>3</sup>, the *Dong Phap Thoi Bao*<sup>4</sup> (Times of French Indochina), progressive youth attacked the regime and criticised the anti-national reformism of the bourgeois and landlords.

As in the rest of the country, the years 1925 and 1926 in Saigon were marked by spirited demonstrations demanding the release of Phan Boi Chau and Nguyen An Ninh and again on the occasion of the funeral of Phan Chau Trinh<sup>5</sup>.

The activities of the Saigon working class increased to an extent hitherto unknown. The strike on March 5, 1920 by the sailors and workers of five French ships at anchor in the port, and their meeting and demonstrations in the streets of Saigon demanding pay increases to meet the high cost of living, were a powerful stimulus for the Vietnamese workers. Ton Duc Thang who had taken part in the the French sailors' mutiny in the Black Sea, set up after his the first underground trade union cells right in the port after his return from France. In

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1. Organ of the French Communist Party.

2. Appearing in French in 1926.

3. The Peasant, appearing in French in 1926.

4. In Vietnamese.

5. 1872-1926: Patriotic scholar contemporary of Phan Boi Chau, representing reformist tendencies. Deported to Poulou Condore, then to France, he returned in 1925 to Saigon where he gave talks which had made a deep impression among the intelligentsia and the youth.

November 1922, 600 dyers at Cholon organized a strike which was appraised by Nguyen Ai Quoc as follows: "This is the first time that such a movement has taken place in the colony. Let us pay attention to this sign of the times"<sup>1</sup>.

The strike of the Ba Son workers in August 1925 was by far the most important of this period: besides demanding an increase of wages and improvement of the living standard, it was aimed at delaying the departure of the warship *Michelet* which was on the point of leaving for China to suppress the Chinese people's struggle against the Western powers. The action was crowned with success: the strikers obtained a 10% wage increase and held up the *Michelet* for four months. This was a historical landmark in the Vietnamese workers' movement, and was reported at the 6th Congress of the Communist International (1928) by the Indochinese delegation as an example of proletarian solidarity.

In June 1925, two months before the Ba Son strike, Nguyen Ai Quoc had founded the Viet Nam Thanh Nien Cach Mang Dong Chi Hoi (Association of Vietnamese Revolutionary Youth) a Marxist-Leninist organization in Canton (China). Young people came from all parts of Viet Nam to attend a revolutionary course under his guidance. This Association carried out its activities among the

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1. *Procès de la Colonisation française* (Indictment of French Colonialisation) by Nguyen Ai Quoc, another name of President Ho Chi Minh.



workers of factories and plantations and among peasant communities in the countryside, and became more and more deep-rooted among the masses, especially from 1928 onward.

In 1926, Saigon witnessed political action by the students of the School of Mechanics, post office workers, printers, Ba Son workers, railwaymen... In 1927, 1928 and 1929, there were political activities among the workers of the BGI, the Cho Quan rice mill, the Portail Printing House, the Nha Be oil depot, hairdressers, and rubber plantation workers.

The development of the struggle among the workers, peasants and intellectuals, and the failure of the Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang (Vietnamese Nationalist Party) in 1930, made it necessary to establish a party capable of leading the whole people in struggle. In February 1930, at Kowloon (China), Nguyen Ai Quoc founded the Indochinese Communist Party which adopted Saigon as one of its most important theatres of action.

# **Revolutionary Upsurge 1930 — 1945**

*NGUYEN NGOC TY — TA XUAN LINH  
and H. N.*

## **In the Wake of the World Crisis**

The two periods of "development" — one at the beginning of this century and the other after World War I — gave Viet Nam the convincing appearance, the social and economic structure, of a colony under permanent exploitation at the end of the twenties: a market for consumer goods and the surplus products of metropolitan industry, and at the same time a source of supply of tropical raw materials for the "mother country", and a recruitment centre for cheap manpower.

In Nam Ky (Cochinchina) the ricefields and rubber plantations began feeding the colonial economy. Industry and the import-export trade were concentrated in Saigon, the biggest port of French Indochina. In 1930, many workshops and factories were to be found there such as the Electric power station, water-works, rice-mills, and soap factories; most of these enterprises were in the hands of French and Chinese capitalists. The proletarian work-force increased in number in the industrial and semi-industrial enterprises as in other branches of trade.

Political unrest was inevitable following the repercussions of the world economic slump in 1930

## REVOLUTIONARY UPSURGE (1930-1945)

which exposed the weaknesses of the colonial economy. The economic recession was particularly serious in Viet Nam owing to the fact that French capitalism sought to make good their losses at home by accelerating exploitation in the colonies. As a result, in Nam Ky and Saigon all social classes were affected. To prop up the big colonial companies threatened with bankruptcy, the administration took drastic measures imposing new burdens on the population in addition to the hardships caused by existing heavy taxes and unemployment. The rubber and rice growers were granted subsidies and loans whereas landless peasants received no relief. In the four provinces of Hau Giang (west of the Mekong delta and the hinterland of Saigon), 132,000 hectares were left fallow. According to Paul Bernard<sup>1</sup>, in 1931, the annual income of a manual worker was 44 piasters in Tonkin, 47 in Annam and 55 in Cochinchina. Thus the annual income of a 5-member family in West Cochinchina was 154 piastres or 1540 francs whereas that of a worker's family in France at the same period was estimated at 10,000 francs.

The economic crisis which increased the burdens of society and the misery of the poor gave fuel to the political movements demanding justice for the people which had developed in the twenties. The Indochinese Communist Party, founded on February 3, 1930 took the leading role in this period. Its pioneers cells set up in a number of industrial

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1. Paul Bernard : *Le problème économique indochinois.*

centres and educational establishments, were very active and even attracted members of the "Thanh Nien Cao Vong" ("High Aspirations" Youth) and the left wing of the Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang (the Nationalist Party) which had been scattered after the Yen Bay insurrection (February 10, 1930). The Lap Hien (Constitutional Party) of the landlords and compradore bourgeois had no attractions for the masses. The leadership of the patriotic and social movement was effectively in the hands of the Indochinese Communist Party whose first Central Committee was set up in Saigon. It became the main centre linking the revolutionary movement at home and abroad with Tran Phu as Secretary General.

### **The First Encounters (1930-1931)**

Parallel with the strikes staged in the North and in the South in these years, the Party organized peasants' demonstrations on a nationwide scale. It was in the provinces of Nghe An and Ha Tinh (Nghe Tinh) that the struggle came to a head. The inhabitants seized power and set up "Soviets" which were brutally suppressed in mid-1931.

Saigon and its suburbs did not lag behind. Strikes were erupting in all important workshops: Ba Son shipyard, Cho Quan Electric Works, the railway system, Di An depot, Nha Be oil depot... Slogans of economic as well as of a political character appeared

on walls, demanding wage increases, improvement of living conditions, total independence for Viet Nam, workers' control of industry, land to the tillers...

The demonstrations were protected by self-defence units of the workers; nevertheless they frequently ended in bloody clashes. During the strike of the Shell workers at Nha Be, many people were wounded by police gunfire and many were arrested (January 14, 1931). At a meeting held by workers and Party leaders on February 9, 1931 in a sports stadium, the young Ly Tu Trong killed the French policeman Legrand. Coming from a revolutionary family this messenger of the Party Central Committee in Saigon had done his political studies in China under the guidance of Nguyen Ai Quoc. Arrested and put to torture, he was finally executed while though not yet 18.

At that time, the strikers at Di An depot put out a series of very revolutionary slogans: "Support the Soviet Union", "Proletarians of the world, unite!"

The Party branch in Saigon led the struggle through the "Red Trade Union". The strikers were supported by collections among the workers.

The workers' struggle was spreading rapidly since the Vietnamese town workers are constantly in touch with the countryside where most of their kith and kin remain. "Communist villages" came into existence, linked to each other by a "red belt" around Saigon, and from May 1930 onward,

demonstrations took place at Ba Hom, Tan Thoi Dong, Ba Queo, Binh Hung Dong...

Daniel Hemery observes that "during these years, South Viet Nam was one of the most active centres of the peasants' and workers' struggle, the most important after Nghe An and Ha Tinh... Saigon was the only big city in Indochina to witness important mass meetings and even short and violent street battles — 6 in 1930 and 3 in 1931. It was necessary to set up military posts in the countryside: at Hoc Mon, Ba Diem, Duc Hoa, near Saigon... to issue firearms to officials and notables and to proceed to aerial demonstration to frighten the peasants into subjection in order to avoid the creation of a second Soviet hotbed in Southern Indochina"<sup>1</sup>.

The bloody repressions temporarily discouraged movement throughout the country from 1932. Tran Phu, Secretary general of the Indochinese Communist Party was arrested and tortured to death in 1931. Deprived of its leadership, the Party network was reorganized while many grassroots organizations remained intact. Between 1932 and 1935, 396 open conflicts between workers and employers were recorded in Saigon compared with 551 throughout Bac Bo (Tonkin)<sup>2</sup>. Worth considering

1. *Révolutionnaires vietnamiens et pouvoir colonial en Indochine*, F. Maspero, Paris 1975.

2. Tran Van Giau: *The Vietnamese Working Class* (Book I) Historical Publishing House, Hanoi.

were the strikes staged by Chinese workers in 13 towel weaving mills (January 21, 1932), and workers of 12 rice mills at Cholon (1934). Organized by the Party, the drivers of one thousand hackney cabs in the suburbs staged a show of strength on November 7, 1935, demanding limitation of fines, reduction of taxes and interdiction of corporal punishment. The communist representatives in the city council backed their petition which was then sent to the Governor of Cochinchina. They were arrested but were soon freed thanks to the intervention of the communist deputies in France.

The role played by the Chinese workers and labourers in Cholon, settlers or refugees from repression in the Canton commune, was not negligible. Many of them were members of communist organizations in the city.

### **Legal Action Begins**

After the losses suffered during the brutal repression following the Nghe Tinh Soviets, the Vietnamese communists went into a strategic retreat from 1932 to 1935: they withdrew underground to reorganize their forces, making the best use of any opportunities for legal activity that arose in order to maintain the movement and its contact with the masses.

Situated in Cochinchina with a colonial status of direct administration<sup>1</sup> and in constant liaison with the progressive struggle of the French people, Saigon was an ideal terrain for revolutionary activity. These were communists and vanguard intellectuals returning from France who helped effectively with their political experience, not to mention those patriots and revolutionaries released from jail who were ready for action again.

Whereas the regional elections (colonial councils, conscription councils) were the business of the very select "people's representatives", under pressure of public opinion, the elections to the Saigon municipal councils, were carried out through a relatively democratic suffrage, thus presenting a possible line of action for the militants, and of pressure from opposition parties.

After the events in 1930-1931, the Paris government resorted to demagogic tricks. In October 1931, Paul Reynaud, Minister of colonies, during his inspection tour of Indochina promised that certain reforms would be carried out. A "native", Bui Quang Chieu — landlord and comparadore bourgeois in the Constitutional Party — was permitted to

1. In the administrative field Viet Nam was divided into 3 regions : Bac Ky (Tonkin). Trung Ky (Annam) and Nam ky (Cochinchina). The first two regions enjoyed still fewer liberties than the third one, being regarded as "protectorates"; they were in fact under a double yoke being oppressed by the native feudals as well as the colonial administration.



to represent Cochinchina at the Great Colonial Council in Paris. This appointment was sharply criticized by the Communist leader Nguyen Van Tao<sup>1</sup> and the patriotic intellectual Nguyen An Ninh, both returned from France. In their paper *Trung Lap* (Neutrality) they criticized the limited suffrage, the "Constitutional Party", the so-called "Franco-Annamite" cooperation, the local reformists and the phoney reform policy preached by Paul Reynaud. The polemic which followed helped arouse the consciousness of the townspeople, and prepare them for the election campaign of April 1933.

The municipal elections, dominated by the pro-colonial 'Constitutional Party' up to then because of the general indifference of the public, excited a great upsurge of interest for the first time. A 'workers' list of candidates' was presented, headed by Nguyen Van Tao, and including three workers and a number of intellectuals.

The electoral programme spread through the press and the leaflets distributed at meetings set forth realistic claims capable of rallying the workers, small functionaries and other social strata: concrete administrative measures to improve living

1. He was active in France as member of the French Communist Party. Bringing from France experience of legal struggle (electioneering campaign, struggle in public organizations...) He was one of the leaders of the resistance in Nam Bo in 1945, and became Minister of Labour of the DRVN.

conditions, introduce T.U. freedom, the right to strike, an 8-hour-work day, social insurances, implementation of French labour law in Indochina, universal suffrage even for women... the campaign was a most propitious occasion for political agitation and propaganda for the Communist Party.

The workers' ticket got many members returned despite the limited franchise. "La Lutte", a paper printed in French, backed these national and democratic claims. Its publication exerted a great influence on the intellectuals. The Municipal Council became a tribune for the propagation of progressive ideas.

In 1934, the *Confédération Générale du Travail Unifiée*, the *Secours Populaire Français* and the *Comité Français d'Action pour l'Amnistie des Condamnés Politiques*, sent a fact-finding mission to Viet Nam headed by Gabriel Péri, a French communist Deputy. The reception of the delegation gave rise to seething vigorous demonstrations among the people despite police intervention. Vietnamese opinion highly appreciated the solidarity of the French working-class.

In 1935, the "La Lutte" group also carried the day at the municipal elections: the Nguyen Van Tao ticket won 4 out of 6 seats reserved for the Vietnamese, against 12 seats for the French.

### **The Indochinese Congress**

In July 1935, the Comintern 7th Congress set forth as priority an urgent task which was the

## REVOLUTIONARY UPSURGE (1930-1945)

struggle for peace, against the aggressive forces of Fascism. The struggle of the Spanish Popular Front, of the Chinese United Front against the Japanese and especially that of the French Popular Front leading to the formation of a democratic coalition government (May 1936) had a great influence on the situation in Indochina. With mass support, the Indochinese Communist Party charted an appropriate line. At its first conference held in July 1936, it decided to set up a broad anti-imperialist popular front (which became the Indochinese Democratic United Front or Indochinese Democratic Front in 1938); putting aside for the time being the objective of overthrowing French imperialist and the anti-feudalist line of land—confiscation, the Front aimed its struggle against the most dangerous enemies of that time, the French fascists and reactionary colonialists.

In France, the working class secured important political and social advantages for the people of the colonies: such as amnesty of political detainees, sending of investigation commissions to work out the necessary conditions for reforms.

The Indochinese Communist Party took advantage of the second of these measures to launch a large-scale campaign for holding an Indochinese Congress, to which the various sections of the people could send their petitions. Nguyen Van Tao, in his booklet "The French Popular Front and the Aspirations of the Indochinese peoples", and Nguyen An Ninh, promoted these ideas in Saigon

which began to spread all over the country from there

Forced by public opinion to join this campaign, the rich bourgeois, landlords and "collaborationist" politicians tried to check its influence. Nguyen Phan Long<sup>1</sup> colonial councillor, and one of the leaders of the Constitutional Party, suggested that it was unnecessary to hold more than one press conference and that work might be confined to the fact-finding Commission. Most of the members of this Party decided to avoid the participation of the working class.

The Communists and other advocates of the broader Indochinese Congress got the upper hand. A Provisional National Committee composed of delegates of workers, labourers and every social stratum, including reformist bourgeois, was set up; even the political prisoners released after the agitation of the Indochinese popular movement and French progressive opinion were represented. Executive committees were set up in workshops, public and private services, and in the villages around the city. Meetings were held at short notice within only 24 hours after the summons. At these meetings, talks, discussions, criticisms, appeals and claims were aired. These activities became more and more numerous after August 1936. In important areas round cities, the authority of the mandarins was diminished visibly.

1. A puppet premier for the French during the first resistance war (1945-1954).

## REVOLUTIONARY UPSURGE (1930-1945)

At the end of 1936, the colonial administration became alarmed and reacted vigorously; it closed the progressive newspapers, forbade the circulation of Nguyen Van Tao's booklet and the organization of mass rallies, summoned the Provisional National Committee to hand over the "collection of the petitions of the population" within four days (September 21 to 25) and then to dissolve itself. Orders were given to the leaders of the Constitutional Party to quit the congress. Nguyen Van Tao, Nguyen An Ninh and other supporters of the movement were arrested and the Congress dissolved.

In January 1937, the French government sent to Indochina the "ambassador of labour" Godard, a radical, and Governor General Brévié, a socialist. The Vietnamese communists did not expect much from these politicians. But they profited by the reception given to Godard to start a widespread mass agitation during which 20,000 Saigonese workers besieged the French emissary with demands on behalf of T.U. members and the working people.

Brévié arrived two weeks after Godard. The colonial administration brought out the police and troops to disperse the demonstrators, but the latter poured into the streets in even greater numbers. The two French envoys were obliged to promise concessions to the T.U.s.

Though suppressed, the Indochinese Congress had served its purpose. As envoys of the people,

the Vietnamese communists came to Paris to demand that the ministry of colonies give permission for the Congress to reconvene. Minister Marius Moutet, a socialist, made a small concession: the Congress would remain dissolved but there would be an examination of the "people's claims" by a special commission.

The dissolution of the Congress did not prevent the population from winning important advances: such as the amnesty of many thousands of political detainees, introduction of a number of social laws (8-hours work days from January 1, 1938, prevention of the employment of women and children in night shifts, 8-week maternity leave, etc.) But the workers were not yet to be granted the principal T.U. freedoms, freedom to strike and social insurances. However the colonial administration cancelled the decree requiring authorization for the holding of demonstrations and the editing of newspapers. This gave the all-clear for the appearance of the *Dan Chung* (The People), legal mouthpiece of the Indochinese Communist Party in Saigon.

In this atmosphere of general political agitation, the working class increased its activities all over the country. In Saigon, the struggle reached its climax in 1936, spreading virtually to all sectors of industry, and all workshops in the city to the workers in Cholon, and even to the sailors of the *Porthos* and two Greek ships berthed in the port. The strike of the hired cab drivers and of Di An

railwaymen demanding the release of the supporters of the Indochinese Congress were clearly of a political character.

In 1937, waves of strikes by workers and wage-earners, and a dozen strikes of small traders from various markets succeeded one another under the slogans: "social insurance, for the workers, "release and amnesty for the militants". The strike of "East-Asian" workers lasted 37 days, that of Tour-Cham-Saigon railwaymen 26 days. These actions were coordinated with others: the strike of five ships berthed in the port, of one hundred weaving mills at Cholon, and of railway depots in Saigon and Di An.

In 1938, with the French government's sudden swing to the right, the repression took a new turn in Viet Nam. In Saigon these were 101 strikes the most important of which were those by 4000 workers on board the 350 boats transporting rice from Cholon to Saigon wharves, and of the staff of 55 tailor's shops.

Despite the new Fascist government in France and its repercussions in Indochina, 1939 saw strikes by the city garbage collectors, the workers at Ba Son shipyard and Di An and Saigon railway depots.

In the period from 1936 to 1939, the working class in Saigon found very good allies among the peasants in the "Red belt" who solidly supported the progressive election campaigns and the Indochinese Congress, and demanded reduction of land

rent and taxes, and democracy in the countryside for themselves. These movements were joined by small traders in the markets and young students notably the students of the Practical Industrial School.

The rally held on May 1, 1938 by thousands of people was a true symbol of unity of many social strata under the slogans: "democratic liberties for the people", "reduction of taxes, down with war, support the Soviet Union".

### **The Indochinese Democratic Front**

The Indochinese Communist Party always advocated the unity of popular forces to struggle on a common front. Its alliance with Ta Thu Thau's Trotskyists and with the middle-of-the-road parties gave rise to a group called "La Lutte" (after the name of its mouthpiece) which won remarkable success at the elections held in Saigon in 1933 and 1935.

But the Trotskyists, whose extremist slogans attracted the inexperienced elements of the petty bourgeoisie, were hostile to the formation of a broad united democratic front<sup>1</sup>, to the setting up of workers' and employees' friendship associations. They were antagonistic to the Soviet Union, the French Popular Front, the Chinese

1. Policy confirmed at the ICP plenums held in March and September 1937.



National Front, against the Japanese and against all major policies of the I.C.P. They found a mouth-piece for their isolationist views in "La Lutte" which they took over as their own organ. In mid-1937, the communists openly rejected their line and began to edit their own papers: "L'Avant Garde", "Le Peuple" and "Dan Chung", to serve the Indochinese Democratic Front.

Against the dangerous Trotskyist deviations, the communist and progressive intellectuals such as Nguyen An Ninh began to wage an uncompromising ideological struggle. The legal communist group "Dan Chung" (name of the ICP paper) succeeded in rallying the working people and large sections of the middle class, and promoting a temporary alliance with other groups and social strata, on certain concrete problems, and in some branches and regions.

The ICP front policy was also skilfully promoted in the press. At the annual session of the Cochinchinese Journalists' Association held in November 1937, the communist journalists demanded the release of the journalists of "Le Peuple", "L'Avant-Garde" and "La Lutte", incarcerated in Saigon Central Prison. Representatives of almost all the Vietnamese periodicals, of the French Popular Socialists in Saigon, the lawyers defending political detainees and such journalists as Laye, Couzet, Giacobi, Le Van Kim, Trinh Dinh Thao<sup>1</sup>,

1. Now President of the Viet Nam Alliance of National, Democratic and Peace Forces.

and even the journalists of the Constitutional Party, gave support to the resolution which was sent as a petition to the administrative authorities.

The alliance with the French Socialist Party (SFIO: Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière), also showed the tactical suppleness of the ICP members. The SFIO, advocates of the Second International, had set up two Franco-Vietnamese branches in Tonkin and Cochinchina after 1936, and these were joined by some progressive Vietnamese intellectuals to demand democratic reforms and the legal implementations in Indochina of the programme of the French Popular Front. The ICP's influence on these members was such that it left its stamp on many of the demands of the SFIO Saigon section such as the sending of fact-finding missions, the ending of repression of journalists and T.U. members, and the release of political detainees.

In 1938, the Popular Front survived the Blum-Chautemps Cabinet, despite the rightist tendency of the new government. The French people struggled to maintain the anti-fascist alliance.

Likewise, the Vietnamese communists consolidated the Indochinese Democratic Front (1938) in place of the anti-imperialist front of earlier days. In Tonkin and Annam, this endeavour was successful in regional elections to the House of people's representatives.

In Cochinchina and Saigon it met with systematic sabotage by the Trotskyists. Despite the back-

ing of the working class, who demonstrated in hundreds of meetings and demonstrations, the Front candidates did not win the 1939 elections to the Colonial Council because there was disagreement over the choice of candidates and the Front failed to get the votes of the middle and higher classes (functionaries, teachers, small landowners, small manufacturers and traders) who were the only ones who actually had the right of franchise<sup>1</sup>.

In France, the reactionary Daladier Cabinet came to office. World War II was about to break out.

### **The Nam Ky Insurrection** (November 23, 1940)

On the outbreak of the war, the colonial administration did its best to strengthen the defence of Indochina. To safeguard its interests it mercilessly repressed the ICP, hoping to destroy the centre of all the popular movements over the last nine years. All the activities and organizations suspected of "communist" influence, as well as all documents of "communist" propaganda were forbidden. Thousands of suspects and political detainees of all leftist tendencies were ruthlessly imprisoned.

Constantly on the alert, the Party had maintained its secret network throughout the previous

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1. Unlike the Saigon municipal elections.

period, and now simply went underground, suffering only minor losses. It concentrated activity mostly in the countryside while continuing its activities in the towns.

The 6th plenum of the ICP Central Committee held in the suburbs of Saigon in November 1939, defined the new tasks as follows: "There is no other way now open to us than to overthrow French imperialism, fight all aggression, white (meaning the Europeans) or yellow (meaning the Japanese — *Ed.*), to wrest back national independence... Prepare conditions for general insurrection, prepare the national liberation revolution."

In 1939, tens of thousands of raw "recruits" were drafted from Saigon for France and the European battlefield, 1.6 million tons of rice and 66,000 tons of rubber were shipped there.

Saigon was living in a atmosphere of terror. From the end of 1939 to the end of 1940, the ICP office in the city was broken into five times and had to be rebuilt. In the course of nine months, 14 papers were closed down. But the ICP influence, chiefly in the T.U.s remained fairly strong in Saigon. in the major industrial works (Ba Son shipyard, fuel depots, railway shops, tramcar service, post and telegraphs services, Bank of Indochina...) The Xom Chieu docks had thus 450 T.U. members, and the Binh Tay distillery 100... 1700 pupils in secondary schools were militant members of their organizations.

The treacheries of the colonial administration's relationship with the Japanese aggression were

unmasked after the French defeat in June 1940. Indochina stood wide open to the Japanese troops. the inhabitants of Bac Son (north Viet Nam) profited by the setback of the French forces at Lang Son to rise up. In the South, hostilities broke out between the French and Thailand, the latter taking advantage of the situation to push their territorial claims into some parts of Cambodia and Laos.

It was in this historical setting early in 1940 that the Party Committee in Cochinchina worked out a plan of armed insurrection to seize power, and by this means to carry out the resolutions of the 6th plenum.

In Saigon and its suburbs, guerilla units of from 3 to 9 members were organized. Members were chosen from among the stalwarts of the existing revolutionary organizations. On the eve of D day, Saigon had 34 such units composed chiefly of workers and students. In October, the Insurrectional Committee of Saigon-Cholon was set up. The various groups had to equip themselves by their own means; those of Ba Son and FACI which manufactured hand-grenades for the French, undertook to supply the people's militia.

Saigon was of course an important staging post for the sending of troops to France and Thailand. Most of the native soldiers had no confidence in the victory of France and had no wish to die a useless death. At Cholon, 300 of them came out in an anti-war demonstration, others deserted. In Saigon, 2000 others blew up the barracks which

they hated for its overcrowding. This action was fiercely punished.

The ICP succeeded in infiltrating the Annamite Workers' Regiment, OMA, the Civil Guard, the Gendarmerie Escort section and the Ba Chieu new recruits' training camp. They got in touch with seven members of the French Communist Party (a naval lieutenant, some other officers working at the Staff headquarters and the Quartermaster's Stores) who supplied them with information, a radio set, 27 pistols and other weapons. They pinned great hopes on the rallying of the Vietnamese conscripts and increasing thereby their supply of arms and ammunition.

Unfortunately at this point, most of the ICP committee members operating in Saigon such as Nguyen Van Cu, Le Hong Phong, Ha Huy Tap, Le Duan<sup>1</sup> fell into the hands of the police. In July, 1940, the Cochinchinese Committee set the date of insurrection for November. Phan Dang Luu, Central Committee member, was sent to Bac Ky (Tonkin) to secure the approval of the Central Committee which had been set up there. The 7th session of the Party held in October, considered the proposed action too premature and sent orders to Nam Ky to wait for simultaneous actions in Trung Ky (Annam, or Central Viet Nam) and Bac Ky. On his return to Saigon, Phan Dang Luu was arrested before he could hand over these instructions.

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1. Now Secretary General of the Communist Party of Viet Nam.

The war between France and Thailand was now raging. Many units stationed in Saigon refused marching orders to go to the Mekong; these appealed for the speeding up of the insurrection. The Cochinchinese Committee met early in November 1940 and fixed the insurrection date for the 23rd of the same month, in an attempt to coordinate the action of the insurgent troops with that of workers' and peasants' organisations throughout Cochinchina.

Alerted to this the colonial administration proceeded to an immediate transfer of the suspected units. The insurrection command had no time to cancel the orders for the uprising. The Saigon Party Committee, deprived of its leaders, was unable to mobilize its forces within the city sufficiently. The French command pinned down the rebellious troops in barracks, and the revolt, activated by the Vietnamese people's militia, broke out sporadically without proper leadership in many provinces in Cochinchina, particularly around Saigon. At My Tho, the gold starred red flag—which later became that of the DRVN—was seen flying for the first time. Here people's power was maintained for 49 days in some rural regions. In many areas, the insurgents proceeded with distribution of land to poor peasants.

As had been planned, on the night of November 22, 1940, thousands of people rushed to Cholon, Gia Dinh, Tan An and central Saigon in an attempt to join with the rebellious units and city-militiamen to storm the Governor's Place and the

Central Prison and release the ICP leaders and militants. The inhabitants in many provinces should have received weapons to arm the revolt on that very night. But the insurrection failed because of the counter measures taken by the French. The attempt was savagely repressed. Nevertheless, with the Bac Son uprising on September 27, 1940 already mentioned, "this was a shot heralding the general insurrection of 1945."

### **Viet Minh Against the Franco-Japanese Oppression**

From 1941 to 1945, French and Japanese were on good terms with one another in a conspiracy to draw the maximum of profit from Indochina and crush all revolutionary movement in that area while at the same time of course awaiting a favourable occasion to liquidate each other. The "joint defence" treaty signed on December 9, 1941 was a de facto recognition of Japanese occupation of the whole of Indochina. Saigon became an important bridge-head for Tokyo's programme of expansion to southern Asia and its many archipelagos there; at the same time it was a key strategic centre and a rice supply base.

The Japanese garrisoned many divisions at the gates of the city and in the main thoroughfares. They converted large houses and schools into barracks and arms depots and built military posts and defence works everywhere. Japanese soldiers



ransacked villages, raped women and manhandled the native population.

The Japanese government strategy was to try to hoodwink the Vietnamese by promising to grant independence to Viet Nam and deluding them with their "co-prosperity of Greater East Asia" doctrine. They set up such para-military organizations as "Patriotic Youth Brigade" (Thanh Nien Ai Quoc Doan) "Defence Brigade" (Phong Ve Doan). They corrupted the leaders of the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao religious sects. The former collaborators of the French colonialists set up friendship groups and societies in Saigon to support the Japanese. In September 1943, the pro-Japanese parties and sects held a congress in the city to combine their forces in the so-called "Alliance to win back independence for Viet Nam" (Viet Nam Phuc Quoc Dong Minh Hoi). Tokyo backed the secret preparations for the formation of a puppet provisional government.

But Japanese influence did not deceive the people of Saigon, who saw through the mask and already knew about Japanese setbacks in China and the Pacific.

From the outset the ICP had denounced the Japanese peril. When Ho Chi Minh returned to the country early in 1941 to take the leadership of the revolutionary movement, the population had been suffering an acute and increasing misery under the double yoke of the French and Japanese. The peasants in Tonkin and Annam were starving

while in Cochinchina, millions of people were reduced to rags owing to the shortage of the basic necessities of life.

At the 8th plenum of the ICP Central Committee convened by Ho Chi Minh at Cao Bang in May 1941, the decision was made to found the Viet Nam Independence League (Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh or Viet Minh for short). The Viet Minh rallied all those who agreed to resist the French and Japanese imperialists and to win genuine national independence. They set up organizations for "national salvation" (Cuu Quoc) which rallied workers, peasants; young people, women, guerillas and even certain of the bourgeois and land-owners). The movement spread like wild fire in Saigon.

Meanwhile, the movement of political agitation continued. When the Japanese landed in Saigon in 1941, 500 dockers at Xom Chieu staged a protest strike against ill-treatment. In 1944, the workers directly sabotaged the Japanese war effort by their strikes at the Stanco Sawmill (producing timber for shipbuilding), at the Chi Hoa military work (employing 500 workers); the tailor's shops in Chaigneau street (making army uniforms) and at the Dai Nam shoe making company.

From 1940 onward, the intellectuals and students never ceased to organize demonstrations. The Scola Club of ICP inspiration exerted a great influence. At the beginning of 1943, the Cochinchina section

of the General Association of Indochinese Students (HQ in Hanoi) stirred up Saigonese opinion by a series of lectures and theatrical performances, followed by activities aimed at popularizing public hygiene and the struggle against illiteracy. Under the banner of patriotism, a holiday camp was organized for 4000 students. In 1944, clubs for the study of Marxism were set up in Saigon and various provinces.

All this political agitation served to counteract and unmask the propaganda put out at that time in favour of the "Franco-Vietnamese Restoration", the so-called "Greater East Asia" of the pro-French Ducoroy<sup>1</sup> Youth", and the pro-Japanese "patriotic youth..." The activity among the youth at that time helped to form many south-Vietnamese leaders in the South such as Huynh Tan Phat (President of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Viet Nam), Tran Buu Kiem (Minister of the Presidency of the PRG), Luu Huu Phuoc (Minister of Culture of the PRG).

### **August 1945 — Uprising in Saigon and throughout the Country**

To avoid any danger of a come-back on the part of the French, the Japanese disarmed the French

1. Major Ducoroy was the promoter of the "Sports and the Youth" movement which was aimed at deflecting Indo-chinese youth from the patriotic movement.

forces in Indochina by a coup de force on March 9, 1945. Famine began to play havoc. Speculations, requisition by the Japanese and hoarding of rice worsened the situation. Responding to the call of the Viet Minh, the population stepped up guerilla warfare. In Cochinchina and Central Viet Nam, the Viet Minh took root in every village.

In Saigon, the T.U. and youth movement witnessed a new upsurge: in 1944, there were only 30 trade unions each with from 25 to 30 members: early in 1945, their organization spread to many handicraft branches. Nearly all the secondary and technical schools had their own organizations.

After their putsch of March 9, 1945, the Japanese tried to muster sympathisers in an attempt to stem the revolutionary tide. Thousands of followers of the Cao Dai religious sect working in Japanese army workshops were joined by other Cao Dai, armed and organized into fighting units. Under the command of Japanese officers, other parties and groups were scraped together: the *Phuc Viet* (*Restoration of Viet Nam*), *Viet Nam Quoc Gia Doc Lap Dang* (Viet Nam National Independence Party) and the Trotskyist Party, formed a so-called "National Front" (August 14, 1945). But the grassroots membership of these organisations as well as the popular masses in general suspected the Japanese's intrigues.

Meanwhile, the ICP made feverish preparations for an insurrection, multiplying its cells in streets

and workshops of Saigon again under the leadership of the Party city committee from June 1945 onward.

The Cochinchina Federation made its appearance. In May 1945 there were 70 T.U. organizations in Saigon with 3,000 members by August, there were 350 with 120,000 members, figures exceeding even those of the period of the Popular Front.

In an attempt to split the popular movement and replace their out-moded military and para-military organizations, the Japanese entrusted a well-known Saigonese intellectual, Dr Pham Ngoc Thach, with the task of grouping the youth in a "national" organization masterminded by them. It happened that Dr Thach was an ICP member who was pretending to work for the Japanese. He set up the Vanguard Youth (Thanh Nien Tien Phong, TNTF) which, taking advantage of its legal status, managed to recruit 200,000 members in Saigon and one million altogether throughout Cochinchina. Backed by the T.U.s the movement spread in all the workers' quarters, workshops, offices, schools. Their members, provided with uniform, were armed with bamboo spears. Their duties were to keep order in the streets and promote social activities... They became so numerous and powerful that the TNTF even overshadowed the pro-Japanese administration. The cadres of the movement were equipped with firearms taken or bought from the Japanese, or better still, seized

from derelict French depots; they did training in guerilla warfare, forming "Shock T.U.", "Shock Youth" and "Shock Self-Defence" units. They numbered 2000 at the beginning of 1945. Under the TNTP insignia, the ICP infiltrated the masses. In an upsurge of enthusiasm, a broad front was created including workers, peasants, youth and the poor, as well as some functionaries, lawyers, physicians, professors... Realizing that they had been taken in, the Japanese authorities suddenly outlawed the TNTP. But by that time it was too late!

Besides, the ICP had converted a major part of the police, the guards, the Heiho troops (particularly at Chi Hoa, Gia Dinh, Cholon) sailors, ex-servicemen and, last but not least, the "Binh Xuyen pirate gang" to the national cause. The National United Front was thus broadened beyond all recognition. On August 16, the Japanese authorities formally transferred "powers" to their Vietnamese quislings. On the 19th, the "Royal Delegate" of the Hue puppet government, Nguyen Van Sam, came to Saigon and tried to parley with the Japanese hoping to obtain weapons to arm the "nationalist parties", in an effort to put up some resistance to the power of the Viet Minh.

At the news of Japanese capitulation (August 15), an important tactical problem came up at the August 16-17 conference of the ICP Cochinchinese Committee: was it better to rise up and seize power at this point or simply to legalize the Party

and the Viet Minh, mobilizing the people for political action against the French and the "Allies"? Fearing a new setback along the lines of 1940 but on a larger scale, the advocates of the second solution preferred to avoid an armed conflict with the Japanese and the Allies. But the majority of the conference decided in favour of insurrection.

In the city, the Party went into action cautiously at first. The Viet Minh contented themselves with legalizing their presence to incite the population. On August 20, 10,000 people, mostly workers, held a rally in front of Nguyen Van Hao theatre to present the Viet Minh plan of attack. The speakers, Nguyen Van Tao (communist) and Huynh Tan Phat (an intellectual) were welcomed with loud applause under the folds of the gold-starred red flag and to the music of revolutionary songs.

On the 22nd, at the TNTF HQ, the leaders of the organization introduced the Viet Minh plan of action to representatives of various parties and religious sects many of whom later joined the National United Front (led by the communists).

On the 23rd, the masses boycotted a meeting organized by pro-Japanese agents to hail the Royal Delegate Nguyen Van Sam, but enthusiastically joined a show of strength organized by the T.N. T.P. of 70,000 young people and workers.

Also on the 23rd, the first attack was crowned with success: power was seized in the province of Tan An and its capital town, (on the outskirts of Saigon). The Japanese garrison did not react.

On August 24, in a sea of " Hammer and Sickle " flags, the Communist Party was presented to the public at Dr Pham Ngoc Thach's office. Meanwhile, the city resounded with insurrectional slogans: " Power to Viet Minh Front ", " Long live the ICP ", " Independence for Viet Nam. "

On the night of August 24, the people's armed units (Shock self-defence, Shock T.U., Shock Youth) mustered at many key points in Saigon to assault the major targets. All the TNTF and T.U. organizations were concentrated at the gates of the city, ready to reinforce the struggle of the people's shock troops. The streets were barricaded.

The insurrection started at midnight on August 25. The offices of the puppet administration were occupied without resistance. At the Governor General's palace, the Bank of Indochina and other points where they were posted, the Japanese troops put up no resistance.

The gold-starred red flags fluttered over the city. The list of the provisional administrative committee members was pinned up on a notice board erected in the heart of the city.

At 2 o'clock in the morning, hundreds of thousands of people together with armed units came surging in from the workers' quarters and the suburbs.

At 7 o'clock, a meeting attended by one million people took place in the Boulevard Norodom for the introduction of the Viet Minh, the Cochinchina committee of the Communist Party and other mass



organizations of the popular Front. The Nam Bo provisional administrative Committee headed by Pham Van Bach, a lawyer, was set up with representatives from the ICP, Viet Minh, TNTP, trade unions, intellectuals and religious groups. The rally then became a vast street demonstration. A French historian<sup>1</sup> wrote: "Admirably organized, the demonstration was held in perfect and even impressive order without the least incident, under the mesmerized gaze of the Frenchmen".

On August 25, 1945 Saigon recovered its freedom after 85 years of foreign domination.

The 19th of August in Hanoi, the 23rd in Hue and the 25th in Saigon, were three major landmarks of the victory of the Vietnamese nation which had struggled for nearly a century to win independence and freedom.

1. Philippe Devillers : *History of Viet Nam from 1940 to 1952*, Seuil Publishing House, 1952.



# PORTRAITS



## **Nguyen Dinh Chieu**

Nguyen Dinh Chieu was born on July 1st, 1822 at the village of Tan Thai, province of Gia Dinh within the present city-limits of Saigon-Cholon). He died on July 3rd, 1888 in Ben Tre at the age of 66.

It was in the imperial city of Hue that he received his education. At 20, he returned to his home province and in the next year he won the degree of Bachelor of Arts in the regional examination. In 1849, while he was preparing for the national examination in Hue, the news of his mother's death compelled him to return to Gia Dinh without delay. An illness deprived him of his eyesight, before he got back to Hue, but in spite of his blindness, he went in for teaching, medicine and literature. His fame as teacher, physician and scholar spread to the 6 provinces dubbed Cochinchina by the Western missionaries.

### **A Great Example of Patriotism**

Nguyen Dinh Chieu's intention was to devote himself entirely to his peaceful work of teaching and medical practice when the French invasion began. In 1858, the enemy bombarded the port of Da Nang (Tourane—Central Viet Nam) to intimidate the Court of Hue. In 1859, they occupied the port of Can Gio and the citadel of Gia Dinh.

In 1862, the Court of Hue surrendered the 3 eastern provinces to the enemy in a humiliating treaty. In 1867, the 3 western provinces followed suit. All

of Cochinchina had now fallen under the grip of French imperialism.

A period of popular resistance began. From the very outset, Nguyen Dinh Chieu took part in the insurgent movement. His writings, inspired with militant patriotism, had a stimulating effect on the morale of the partisans.

After the suppression of the popular resistance in Cochinchina, Nguyen Dinh Chieu was compelled to live under the domination of the occupying power, but never gave up his struggle. Through his literary works, he sought to keep alight among the population of the 6 provinces a flame of confidence in the country's future and of hope in the struggle for liberation.

The colonialists and their lackeys tried to win him over. The governor of Ben Tre, Michel Ponchon, made frequent visits to the poet. Once the Frenchman offered to return his house and land in Saigon. Nguyen Dinh Chieu retorted proudly. "When the King's domain has been lost, why should I bother about mine?"

On another occasion, the official press of Saigon wanted to organise a public subscription for his assistance, but Nguyen Dinh Chieu refused, knowing only too well that this was another attempt to buy him over. He was proud to live in poverty and to refuse collaboration with the invader. To demonstrate his opposition, he refused to use articles imported from France and to send his children to Frenchified schools. Until his death, he was always

an irreproachable patriot in his behaviour, commanding the respect of the people of Cochinchina.

### **A Militant Writer**

In the time of Nguyen Dinh Chieu, feudal society was falling into utter decay. Most of the intellectuals, only too conscious of the rottenness of this corrupt regime, gave way to despair. Nguyen Dinh Chieu adopted a quite different attitude. He considered it the duty of any respectable scholar to work for the improvement of the morals and life of the people. To this end, he wrote *Luc Van Tien*. A long poem of over two thousand verses, this work constitutes an indictment of the corruptions so rampant under the feudal regime. It is also a vindication of the true virtues often found among the common people: patriotism, filial piety, marital fidelity, friendship, self-abnegation, devotion to exalted ideals...

The scholar *Luc Van Tien* — the hero of the novel, and his betrothed *Kieu Nguyet Nga*, his friends *Hon Minh* and *Vuong Tu Truc*, the simple folk like the innkeeper, the fisherman and the woodcutter, in short the "good guys", form a kind of united front of the good against the evil. They wage a relentless struggle for the triumph of righteousness.

The author particularly emphasised the character of *Luc Van Tien*, a "fearless and blameless knight", and that of *Kieu Nguyet Nga*, a virtuous young woman. Unflinching in face of danger and always

ready to sacrifice his life for the Fatherland, Luc Van Tien incarnates the ideal of the proud patriotic Cochinchinese youth of the times. Kieu Nguyet Nga is the epitome of the best qualities of the Vietnamese woman.

"Luc Van Tien" was written just after the French invasion. Yet the problems it raised and the ideal it glorified were to exert a great educative influence on the young generation called upon to fight the French colonialists.

When the colonialist aggression began, the militant pen of Nguyen Dinh Chieu was devoted to the struggle for national salvation. Nguyen Dinh Chieu became the poet of the Resistance. He made careful observations on each combat action, encouraged the partisans in their resistance and sang their exploits. The peasant-soldier in the insurgent army was depicted with much affection and realism in his writings, especially in the famous Funeral Oration for the heroes of Can Giuoc.

Nguyen Dinh Chieu's last masterpiece was the Dialogue on Medicine between the Fisherman and the Woodcutter, written after the French had succeeded in imposing their domination over all of Cochinchina. It is the profession of faith of a great patriot. In the work, of course, he discusses medicine and his experience as a practitioner, but using allegory, he sets out to affirm, above all, his firm stand as arch enemy of French colonialism. Besides his immense grief over the enslavement of his country, the author expressed his unshakable confidence in the destiny of the Vietnamese people. He



firmly believed that one day "a refreshing rain will purify our mountains and rivers".

The patriotic writings of Nguyen Dinh Chieu are the major and most beautiful part of the heritage bequeathed by the poet. Continuing and developing the humanist ideal expressed in Luc Van Tien, his early work, these writings have inspired more than one generation of south Vietnamese patriots in the fight against the invaders to safeguard national independence and dignity.

HOANG HUU YEN

### Some of Nguyen Dinh Chieu's Poems

#### IMPRESSIONS

Flowers and grass wait sadly for the first spring  
wind.

Oh Sun, where are you ? We beseech you to appear !

Clouds shroud the passes of the North.

When will the swallow bring the good news ?<sup>1</sup>

Day fades away on the southern peaks.

When will the song of returning birds be heard  
again ?

Age-old frontiers divide our countries ;

1. The blind poet waited in vain for news of the arrival of the Royal troops from Hue, or a popular uprising.



The worthless hordes of ants, half-crazed, cling  
wildly to straws;  
Tangles of duckweed float by, carried away by the  
tide;

And in the gloom of the ravaged woods  
The trembling songs of decoys are heard.  
Treacherous hounds squat in high places.  
Oh, how can the Emperor have the heart to leave  
the people in the lurch, in the floods?  
Emperor Vu, where are you? <sup>1</sup>

#### FUNERAL ORATION FOR THE PARTISANS

*The ancient district of Can Giuoc is now part of Cho Lon, a Saigon suburb. In December 1861 this place witnessed a fierce battle between the insurgent forces of the people and the French occupation troops. This funeral oration is one of the most popular pieces of writing of Vietnamese literature. In a language that has at the same time the erudition of a scholar and the force of the accent of the people, it recounts how the simple, barefooted peasants in tattered garments and armed only with bamboo spears—the guerillas of that time—volunteered to defend the independence of the country and by their sacrifice became national heroes. This text written in rhymed couplets, was to be recited during the ceremony in honour of those who fell*

1. Emperor Vu (King Vu) of the Ha dynasty (Hsia: 21st-16th century B.C.) was renowned for his ability to tame floods.

*by a scholar who would chant it kneeling before an altar erected for the occasion. This type of song belongs to the category called "phu".*

Enemy guns shake the earth,  
Only the bright hope of the people shines in the  
black sky<sup>1</sup>

Given ten years to clear the land  
How many of you will survive the struggle  
Your glory, riding a float in the stormy waves can  
never sink,  
The fame of a just battle against the western invaders — though lost — will forever resound like the  
echoes of the wooden gong.

Let us remember :

Your life of toil was hard and lonely

Misery, poverty, and cares.

Strangers to the drilling square, to horses,

You had never been under soldiers' discipline.

All life long your hands had handled the pick, the  
plough and the harrow ; yours was the art of  
transplanting young rice,

As for the art of holding the shield, the gun, the  
sword, the flag...

Your eyes had never seen such things.

The moan of the wind and the cry of the crane,  
Harbingers of war...

During ten long months your hearts grew desperate  
Waiting for the news of the army,  
Like the scorching sky waiting for rain.



You did not wait to be drilled in the 18 military skills,  
You did not demand to be taught the 90 plans of battle array.  
For uniforms you had your old garments of coarse cloth  
You asked for neither cartridge belts nor powder flasks.  
As weapons you had only sharpened bamboos, all you needed was a hatchet and a battle helmet.  
With a brand of twisted straw you set fire to the lair of the traitors  
No officers to sound the attack, you simply came with choppers to dispatch the lieutenants of the enemy  
By yourselves you broke through the stockades overcoming all obstacles, to go into the attack.  
Fearing neither cannon balls nor bullets, you broke through the gates into the enemy posts regardless of danger to your lives,  
Once among them you hit them left and right till the mercenaries broke ranks and fled mad with fear  
Like waves, you advanced shouting defiance to the metal ships whose guns boomed an echo from the flood.  
You had hoped that your hearts good and true would give long service to our cause; you never thought to find mortality so soon.

Firmly believing in your star on the battlefield you  
doubted not that the horse's skin would become  
your shroud.

After so full a life, you retired too soon to the  
world of shades. But it is after all a home  
coming. No need to wait for your sons to place  
your tiger sword over your tomb.

On the bank of the river of Can Giuoc,

On the grass, on wild rushes, over long miles  
sadness lingered,

The Truong Binh market keeps remembrance of  
your courage

Young and Old stand together, tears running from  
their eyes.

You were neither bandits nor rascals,  
forcibly conscripted.

You were neither cowards nor traitors  
when, having failed to defend some citadel,  
you were dragged along with the army.

But these were your thoughts. That each foot of our  
land and each shoot from our earth should be  
held under our own king.

We owe these to our land for its continued  
prosperity

For every bowl of rice and a length of cloth

Our debt is to life

What do we owe to these strangers?

What is the matter with their ancestors that they  
come and dispute rights with us?

Whose fault is it that our fighting men and officers  
endure so much hardship, eat in the snow and  
sleep on the hard earth.

Whose fault is it that the ramparts of our citadels  
are nothing more than ruins which sag under  
the rain and crumble in the wind?

What meaning has life when you are compelled to  
live with heretics who cast away the incense  
burner, break the altars. To see this made our  
spirits heavy.

What was the meaning of life when you were  
pressed into the enemy militia to drink their  
insipid wine and swallow their bread? A great  
shame increased our humiliation.

Better to die fighting the enemy and to return to  
our ancestors in glory.  
than to survive in submission to the western  
strangers and share a miserable life with  
barbarians!

Alas!

At Tan Thanh<sup>3</sup> pagoda,  
from dark till dawn  
vigils in the icy cold...

you left your faithful hearts wide open to the full  
moon.

In the French camp, in one brief quarter hour  
battle you paid your debt of rage.

Wretched fate! Your bodies were thrown into the  
river.



Oh the sorrow of the old mothers who sat mourning  
for the young men, far into the night, by the  
trembling lamplight in the hut.

On the deadness in the hearts of the wives watching  
pinning, for their mates. Agonising were the  
shades of dusk that drooped over the village  
lanes.

Oh !

The one battle — blurred in smoke  
In a thousand years your glory will shine  
Their troops were still encamped near the quay of  
the Buffaloes' sending dark clouds over the  
four horizons.  
Our ancestors still sleep in the ground of the Deer  
Glade<sup>3</sup>

Who is to save the defenceless people ?  
You perished but you had discharged you debt  
towards mountains and rivers.

Your renown was sung in six provinces.  
You perished but the temples celebrated your  
honour and your renown will be perpetuated  
from generation to generation.

Living you fought the enemy  
dead you stil fight the enemy,  
Your spirit of courage is a constant spur to our  
fighters

Many thousands aspire to avenge you.

Living you served the King  
Dead you still serve the King.

His words are clear.

The name of your sons will bear your glory

Never will the tears shed for the heroes be dried —  
they will always love those who belong to the  
people.

How sweet is the perfume of the incense that  
burns for the partisans

So devoted to their country—the land of their  
king.

1. Another interpretation : the heart of the people illuminates the sky.

2. Reference to Luu Bang, founder of the Han dynasty who killed the white snake and took the Tan (Ts'in) Empire. The loss of this empire was compared to the flight of a deer.

3. Pagoda occupied and turned into military barracks by the French.

4. Ben Nghe.

5. Dong Nai.

## **Truong Dinh, the Soul of the Popular Resistance (1860–1864)**

### **Truong Dinh and the Insurgent Troops**

Truong Dinh was born in 1820 or 1821 in Binh Son, province of Quang Ngai. While still a child, he followed his father, Truong Cam, a colonel of the provincial army, to Gia Dinh. When he reached his majority, he married the daughter of a well-to-do family at Tan An, in the province of Dinh Tuong and after his father's death, the young man chose to stay in his wife's native region.

According to both Nguyen Thong, then director of education in Vinh Long, (in his book *Ky Xuyen Van Sao*) and to Paulin Vial, an eyewitness who wrote *Les Premières Années de la Cochinchine* (The First years of Cochinchina), Truong Dinh was a tall man with a fair complexion and a proud bearing. In his youth he was renowned for his intelligence, his marksmanship and his sound knowledge of military art. During the reign of King Tu Duc, he spent some of his wealth on organizing the poor and in clearing waste land. This undertaking earned

him promotion to the post of *quan cao*, a position created by the feudal state for the administration and supervision of plantation labourers. He showed himself to be a good organiser and showed solicitude for the workers, who respected him.

In 1859 French troops attacked Gia Dinh. The commander of the citadel, Vo Duy Ninh, was killed in action and the imperial army put to rout. Truong Dinh stationed his own forces (composed of 500 farm hands) at Thuan Kieu to resist the French. On this occasion he showed great courage. Lieutenant Paulin Vial who engaged with him in combat several times was compelled to acknowledge his bravery. In his book, Paulin Vial gives the following account: "Truong Dinh had a comrade by the name of Huy. When the French seized Dong Son, Huy went over to the conquerors who nominated him canton chief. In this new function, Huy lived among the French garrison. He succeeded in spotting Truong Dinh's camp site and sent a servant to inform the French of the discovery. The carrier of the secret letter took it to Truong Dinh. After reading it, Truong Dinh immediately went to Dong Son, cut off the traitor's head, then returned to his camp unscathed. This happened in the very region where French troops were concentrated". Paulin Vial added that this daring action made Truong Dinh famous and enhanced his prestige as a rebel dedicated to a noble cause. In another passage, Paulin Vial acknowledged that Truong Dinh possessed all the flexibility and boldness necessary

for the fulfilment of the complicated task he had set himself.

In the first month of the Lunar year of Tan Dau (1861) the royal army, routed at Phu Tho, had to fall back to Bien Hoa. Truong Dinh also withdrew his forces to Tan Hoa base. He was then commanding the armed plantation workers and the regular soldiers of the Court just reassembled after their debacle. When the French besieged Bien Hoa and Vinh Long, they dismissed Truong Dinh and his men as nothing but ordinary pirates who hardly merited attention. Truong Dinh took advantage of this lack of vigilance to acquire and store food, manufacture arms and munitions and raise troops with the help of two mandarins, the tri huyen (district chief) Luu Tan Thien and Bat pham tho lai (an 8th degree clerk) Le Quang Quyen. The insurgents' numerical strength already ran to a thousand. Thanks to his familiarity with the terrain, Truong Dinh was able to mount many ambushes, inflicting heavy losses on the French. On receiving the news of his victories, the Court nominated him Lieutenant-colonel of the Gia Dinh provincial army. In the 11th month of the year Tan Dau (1861) French troops seized Bien Hoa. The two mandarins in charge of the defence of the district, Than Van Nhiep and Nguyen Tuc Trung, were severely reprimanded by the Court which enjoined them to contact Truong Dinh at Tan Hoa and to endeavour by concerted action to recapture Bien Hoa. At this juncture, Truong Dinh had already succeeded in occupying Qui Son and his army now consisted of

6 divisions totalling more than 6,000 men (according to the *Dai Nam thuc luc chinh bien*, Volume IV, Book 25).

The occupation of Gia Dinh by the French immediately triggered popular resistance in many parts of Cochinchina. In most cases, the insurgent troops lacked discipline; at one moment they were grouped together, and the next, they dispersed, without orders.<sup>1</sup> Only the forces commanded by Truong Dinh and those of Pham Tuan Phat at Kac Khau and Nguyen Van Trung at Tan Thanh were organized to any extent<sup>2</sup>. The discipline of Truong Dinh's men earned them popular support and their ranks grew continually. Their courage in battle made them respected. In the second month of the year Nham Tuat (1862) Truong Dinh's growing prestige led the Court to give him the command of all the patriotic troops in Gia Dinh with their principal base at Go Thuong (district of Tan Hoa). It should be pointed out that Truong Dinh's men, moved by high patriotic fervour, were fully aware that they were fighting to safeguard the country's independence. In this *Histoire de l'expédition de Cochinchine* (History of the Cochinchina Expedition), Leopold Pallu de la Barrière remarked that "the attack on Go Cong by a well-led armed band astounded everybody. One believed the Annamites to be still buried in primitive stupor. The servile, frightened

1. According to the *Ky Xuyen Van Sao* by Nguyen Thong.

2. op. cit.

crowd that went trembling past the French in Saigon did not foreshadow such an act of resistance..."

Now let us examine the strategy and tactics employed by the troops of Truong Dinh.

A letter from the latter to Viceroy Phan Thanh Gian gives the impression that the strategy adopted by Truong Dinh was basically that of a protracted war.

Concerning the tactics employed by the insurgent troops, in his *Souvenirs de l'expédition de Cochinchine* (Memoirs on the Cochinchina Expedition) Lieutenant Prudhomme who had experience of the forces of Truong Dinh in the field noted that their tactics were to concentrate a sudden attack on a given point, applying the guerilla method in their offensive as well as in their retreat.

The author added that the enemy knew how to take advantage of their terrain which was criss-crossed by rivers, to sneak through the obstacles, appear suddenly, discharge their arms and disappear as silently as they came; returning later to harass the enemy again giving him no breathing-space, tiring him out, and finally compelling him to give up<sup>1</sup>

The author of *Histoire de l'Expedition de Cochinchine* complained that the French were caught in a war against an invisible enemy which seemed to spring from the earth, an observation which shows

1. Prudhomme — Op.cit. p.165.

that Truong Dinh troops were everywhere and nowhere. The French army had to spread thin its forces to face them and, in the occupied areas, erect scattered control posts here and there, 5 at first, then 7. About their dispersion, Leopold Pallu de la Barriere noted in his book that the war would have no end and that each inhabitant could be instantly converted into a soldier: it seemed that the only possible way to subdue these people would be to post a soldier to take charge of each one of the population. To cope with the difficult situation facing the French troops in the years 1861-1862, Leopold Pallu de la Barriere dismissed this suggestion as impossible. He himself remarked that the Truong Dinh-led anti-French Resistance was a people's war with active participation and support from virtually all sections of the population. "The fact is that the resistance centre was everywhere, subdivided ad infinitum nearly as many times as there were living Annamese. It would be more exact to consider each peasant who was fastening a sheaf of rice plants as a centre of resistance."<sup>1</sup>

From 1859 to 1861, the French seized part of Cochinchina, but most of the inhabitants, especially those of firm character, refused to collaborate with the occupationists who had great difficulty in finding a sufficient number of indigenous administrators.

1. *Histoire de l'Expedition de Cochinchine 1861* by Leopold Pallu de la Barrière, p. 224.



Referring to this shortage of pro-French collaborators Paul Vidat wrote in *"Les Premières Années de la Cochinchine"* that an attempt was made to find intelligent and capable persons among the Annamites to accept responsible positions but even after the conquest, men of intelligence and probity in whom responsibility could be placed still could not be found. In the long run, the French army succeeded only in securing the service of a small number of interpreters, cooks and scoundrels. The Vietnamese boycotted the occupiers and regarded those who collaborated with the French as traitors. This was a fact acknowledged by the French themselves, judging from the following passage of Leopold Pallu de la Barrière, "There was not a single Annamite who did not consider those who had thrown in their lot with the French to be patricides" (op. cit). The people moved out of the conquered areas.

The troops of Truong Dinh were active essentially in the regions of Go Cong, Tan An, Can Giuoc, Ben Luc, Ba Hom, Thuan Kien, Trang Bang and other points in the three eastern provinces (Bien Hoa, Gia Dinh and Dinh Tuong), that is, in almost half of Cochinchina.

While Phan Thanh Gian and Lam Duy Hiep were signing the humiliating peace treaty ceding these same provinces to France, Truong Dinh's men, in coordination with the royal army, were still frequently inflicting losses on the French troops. It is common knowledge that after the seizure of Saigon,

he converted pagodas in the Saigon-Cholon area into defence works, such as Mai Son, Cho Ray, and Khai Tuong. In an overnight attack on July 3, 1860 on the Cho Ray garrison which was defended by 100 Spanish and 60 French troops respectively commanded by Capt. Hernandez and the lieutenants Narac and Gervais, the forces of Truong Dinh and the Royal army inflicted losses on the enemy and then withdrew.

Similar actions went on in other places in November and early in December 1860, when the French positions in Can Giuoc, Thu Dau Mot, Tay Ninh and Trang Bang came under attack. The most interesting event was the destruction of the French vessel "Esperance" on the river Nhat Tao near Ben Luc. On the afternoon of December 10, 1861, Truong Dinh troops led by Nguyen Trung Truc moved along the bank of Nhat Tao and closed in upon the "Esperance" to provoke its crew. The ship's commander, Lt. Odr. Parfait, brought his men out in pursuit of the Vietnamese. When they were 3 kilometres away, covered junks sailed towards the vessel where the sailors were strutting on the deck. A non-commissioned officer who observed the junks through a porthole took them for merchant boats coming for their passes. When the junks were along side the vessel, the partisans lying in hiding in them jumped on to the deck. The NCO was stabbed and killed instantly. The whole crew but 2 French and 3 Tagals (Filipino soldiers) met with the same fate.

Upon hearing the news, Parfait made immediate efforts to raise reinforcements for a counter-offensive on board the sister ship *Garonne*. By the time this ship reached Ben Luc, the attacking forces had already withdrawn. According to Paulin Vial (*Les Premières Années de la Cochinchine*), the battle of Ben Luc cost the colonialists the deaths of 17 French and Tagal soldiers in addition to the "Esperance". While the vessel went up in flames, the puppet position manned by 20 men on the bank of Nhat Tao was completely destroyed by the insurgents.

In retaliation the French troops set the village of Nhat Tao on fire but could burn only empty huts as the population had disappeared.

In all the occupied areas, the invaders came under constant attack and ran into growing difficulties. This situation prompted their C-in-C. Admiral Bonard, to abandon the posts of Go Cong, Cho Gao, Gia Thanh and Cai Be : Bonard also recalled to Saigon those French officers who had taken administrative jobs in Can Giuoc, Tan An and Tan Hoa.

On March 10, 1862, a gunboat with a company of French troops was blown up soon after it left My Tho wharf. French troops stationed in My Tho rushed to its rescue but succeeded in bringing ashore only a few survivors. Thirty five of the crew members were drowned and 17 others seriously wounded.

Towards the end of April 1862, an attempt to poison the French military was uncovered in Saigon. Two Chinese working with the French army were putting arsenic into their meals. The colonialists arrested them and killed all involved in the conspiracy. In the same period, two traitors living in the house of Corporal Thiec, a puppet militiaman who had been converted to Catholicism were also poisoned. The culprits remained unknown.

The insurgent forces thus co-operated with the royal army very effectively. Their activities at the beginning of 1862 landed the French troops in a precarious situation. Unable to install a puppet administration, the enemy had to abandon many positions. His land and river communications were constantly attacked and cut off. His field of activity shrank considerably while that of the insurgents kept widening. The whole region lying between the rivers Eastern Vam Co and Cholon was completely liberated. The insurgents increased their pressure on the French army which now fell back to defensive positions. As Paulin Vial put it, the native forces moved out from My Tho and Bien Hoa, to conduct their night attacks on French vessels moored in ports. In their tiny boats they could move everywhere, undetectable among thick mangroves. They appeared suddenly in large groups, pillaging and burning villages controlled by the colonialists and then disappeared as suddenly as they came.

### **The Signing of the Treaty by Phan Thanh Gian and Lam Duy Hiep in 1862.**

Why did the Nguyen dynasty decide to sign the peace treaty of June 5, 1862 ceding the 3 provinces of Eastern Cochinchina to France, when the forces led by Truong Dinh were gaining the upper hand of French troops everywhere and when these were now beset with difficulties ?

The following is the opinion of Paulin Vidal<sup>1</sup>, an officer who took part in many battles against Truong Dinh and who was present at the reception of the Phan Thanh Gian delegation which come from Saigon on board the "Aigle des Mers" to negotiate the signing of the treaty with Bonard: The Annamite government (the Court of Hue), which had already rejected French peace terms on several occasions, finally concluded that it was impossible for it to conduct a long resistance. Although the King of Hue held absolute authority, yet he never acted in important matters without seeking advice from his high ranking mandarins. It can be truly said that the King did not take any important decision independently of the pressure of opinion, that is not the opinion of the popular masses, but of the intellectual elite and mandarins who surrounded him. A letter from Admiral Bonard makes it clear that the negotiations proceeded rapidly. Originally the

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1. Op.cit.

French had demanded all the 6 Cochinchinese provinces in addition to important war reparations based on their expenditure occasioned by a 4-year war, fought 3,000 miles from Europe. In the end, however, they had to content themselves with the cession of the 3 provinces of Saigon, My Tho and Bien Hoa (i.e. Gia Dinh, Dinh Tuong and Bien Hoa), which they already occupied, and a cash payment of 20 million francs over a 10-year period. The province of Vinh Long was to be handed back to the Annamites when the population of the 3 above-mentioned provinces, now rebelling against orders from Hue, had been "recalled to their duty" (i.e. to abandonment of their struggle).

It was surprising, remarked Bonard, that these concessions had at last been made by the Court of Hue which hitherto had squarely rejected all French peace terms; strange that they should suddenly offer to negotiate a peace treaty on such modest terms.

According to Bonard, Phan Thanh Gian, a 70-year-old dignitary, and his friend Lam Duy Hiep openly declared at the beginning of the negotiations that the "Empire of Annam" was now in a desperate situation, and that to safeguard the throne, their King had entrusted them with the mission of exploring acceptable peace conditions.

In fact, the revelations made by Phan Thanh Gian and Lam Duy Hiep and their followers and certain letters from the Northern Catholics revealed the fact that the Emperor of Hue was indeed facing

a redoubtable adversary in the North. An adventurer named Ta Van Phung who claimed to be a descendant of the Le dynasty had succeeded in rousing a major part of the population to rebellion and had already captured 3 districts. As the leader of 20,000 insurgents he was now threatening Ke Cho (Hanoi).

At the same time, however, France herself was confronted with enormous difficulties at home as well as in international relations, which, together with the ever developing insurgent movement in Cochinchina and the imperial army there, caused her many headaches. Hardly had the war of aggression which France had been waging with Great Britain against China come to an end, when her troops, commanded by Charner, moved in for the invasion of Cochinchina, an undertaking which cost 60 million francs in 1860, 57 million in 1861 and 22 million the following year. In 1862 still bogged down in the Cochinchina quagmire, France also became entangled in the Mexican war whither Napoleon III had to dispatch 7,000 men, only to suffer a disastrous defeat at Pueblo. To re-take Pueblo would have necessitated the dispatch of a fresh contingent of 20,000 men. The prolongation of the Far Eastern war being particularly burdensome, French commercial and political circles appeared very undecided as to the advisability of promoting the Cochinchina expedition. In 1860 France had at her disposal in this region only 4,000 French and 250 Spanish soldiers. All told 4,250 men, this comprised the total of her forces available in the Far

East. To add to these 4,250 men for an attack on the 3 provinces of Eastern Cochinchina, she was obliged to muster all the numerical strength of her expeditionary corps in China. The Government of Napoleon III was not in a position to send new reinforcements to Cochinchina. This was the major motive of the peace overtures made by the French command in Saigon to the Nguyen Court which followed each of its tactical victory over the latter. In 1862, the French came to realise clearly that they could not hope for reinforcements from home; moreover, their troops were decimated by protracted fighting and the climatic conditions in Cochinchina. According to Prudhomme, Paulin Vial and Leopold Pallu de la Barriere, the 3 authors who have written about the Cochinchina Expedition, from 1860 to 1862, diseases (diarrhoea, dysentery, malaria) took a much heavier toll on French soldiers than the combat itself.

Certain puppet troops had been trained, but their number was still small and their morale very unsteady. The French Command had to abandon important positions such as Go Cong, Cho Gao, Gia Thanh and Cai Be in March 1861. Prudhomme remarked that the small French units were too scattered to be able to support each other or to stand longer against the growing threat of the insurgent troops. The colonial army not only had to abandon a good number of important positions but also had to abolish the puppet administrative services set up in 1861, in Tan An, Tan Hoa and Can Giuoc.



Considering the difficult and critical situation of the invaders, if the Nguyen Court had seen fit to continue the resistance together with the people, the toll of French lives lost in combat actions and through diseases would have increased decisively. The crisis in numerical strength that plagued the French army would have been aggravated, French troops would have been compelled to abandon more positions and the resistance forces would have continued to increase. There is no doubt that victory would have gone to the Vietnamese side in the end.

Unfortunately, at the very moment when the struggle was going so favourably, the Court of Hue accepted peace on French terms. Paulin Vial reveals that the Court at this juncture thought only of concentrating its forces against the revolt of the Catholic Ta Van Phung which, lacking the support of the peasants and the people, was quelled in the 7th month of the year At Suu (1865).

There is another reason explaining the Court decision to capitulate: it was intimidated by the French weaponry, particularly the cannon with their very accurate fire and great destructive power. The royal artillery on the other hand had proved to be ineffective. The projectiles unleashed by the French navy on Da Nang (1858) and Gia Dinh (1859) struck panic into the Court of Hue which failed to observe that its enemy faced a crisis of troop strength in the years 1860-1862.

With regard to the treaty of 1862, Paulin Vial only mentions the ceding to France of the 3 Eastern provinces of Cochinchina and the payment to France and Spain of a war indemnity of 20 million francs. He fails to mention another article of the treaty. Article 4 which stipulated that if the Kingdom of Annam decided to establish relations with another country it should inform the French government and any cession of Vietnamese territory by the Court required the prior consent of France. This particularly disastrous provision spelled out the loss of national sovereignty and paved the way for the French colonialists to invade the whole of Viet Nam in the next phase.

The treaty was a severe blow to the army of Truong Dinh and other insurgent forces. Militarily, it deprived them of the important support of the regular royal army whose morale was not high but which possessed better means of attack against military posts. The sudden cessation of fighting by the royal army landed the troops of Truong Dinh in a difficult position: they now had to deal singlehanded with the entire French expeditionary force in Cochinchina. Their shortage of weapons and qualified military commanders made their situation worse.

Politically, the treaty created a legal basis for the traitors' activities. Prior to June 5, 1862 (the date of the signing of the shameful treaty), they could operate only secretly in French-occupied areas. They were still afraid of the Court's authority

and representatives, although they did not wish to recognise them. On board the *Aigle des Mers*, they came to beg their new masters for permission to kowtow 4 times before the imperial envoys Phan Thanh Gian and Lam Duy Hiep. They were living under the protection of French bayonets but in constant fear. They had seen the French commanders worsted in Da Nang and turning tail before the Ta Van Phung gang in Tonkin. They doubted they could avoid the same fate as Ta Van Phung. As they constantly worried about their own heads they dared not engage in any open rebellion as yet vis a vis the Court. This was why few people followed them. They trembled to see their masters, reduced to powerlessness before the resistance forces, abandon Go Cong, Cho Gao, Gia Thanh and Can Giuoc. The signing of the peace treaty by the Court of Hue provided them with a legal status. From now on they could freely indulge in acts of treason in the 3 eastern provinces which the King had formally recognised as French territory. So, their ranks began to swell. From these provinces, they conducted an extensive pro-French propaganda campaign and staged provocations with a view to providing pretexts for the French to extend their grip on the 3 Western provinces. As a matter of fact, in July 1867, the commander of the French forces, De la Grandiere, had the 3 Western provinces — Vinh Long, An Giang and Ha Tien — seized under the pretext that the population were still maintaining contact with the insurgent forces in Eastern Cochinchina. The operation was carried out quite

easily. While the enemy took the field Phan Thanh Gian recommended to the mandarins of these provinces that they surrender to avoid massacres. Having occupied all of Cochinchina, the French colonialists sent their agents to Central and especially North Viet Nam to stage provocations. These two regions, fell into their hands in the end.

The treaty produced a baleful effect on the morale of Truong Dinh's men. After the signing, in the 7th month of the year Nham Tuat (1862) the Court decreed the cessation of military operations and recalled Nguyen Tuc Trung and others to Hue. Truong Dinh, promoted to military commander of the province of An Giang, received orders to disband his army even before assuming his new function. Nguyen Tuc Trung dismissed his troops and then wrote to Truong Dinh, inviting him to set out immediately. Truong Dinh disbanded his personal guard and stayed behind alone to review his troops. But his old fighting mates, those who had been with him from the beginning, refused to disarm and persuaded their leader to continue the fight.

Thus the treaty of 1862 and the imperial order was not without influence on the leader of the insurrection. The Court assumed that the military leaders shared their lack of moral fibre and would be relieved by the royal decision. The truth was otherwise. If Truong Dinh and other insurgent chiefs at first agreed to disband their troops, it was not because they were reluctant to fight the French but merely because they felt obliged to comply with the order of the Court. According to Confucian

ethics, this obedience was a token of loyalty to the King.

### **Truong Dinh Continued the Resistance**

The French, who were plagued with all sorts of difficulties at this time, had not expected the court of Hue to be willing to negotiate, still less to sign the treaty—ceding the three Eastern provinces. The very next day, June 6th, 1862, the French military command had the news of the conclusion of the treaty disseminated in great haste, hoping thereby to put an immediate end to the resistance of the Cochinchina population. But contrary to their expectations, the insurgent chiefs refused to submit to the new puppet administration. They remained in the conceded territory, levying taxes, pillaging convoys and attacking the Europeans at every opportunity.

Thus, at the moment when Admiral Bonard thought he had put an end to the bloody war, he met with a resistance still more redoubtable than a formal war against the Hue regular army.

As has been said above, Truong Dinh was animated by the sense of loyalty to the King, and was at first inclined to obey the orders of the Court. However, at the insistence of the people, he stayed in the occupied areas to lead the resistance. His respect for the people's aspirations is expressed in the funeral oration (Van Te Truong Dinh) written in his

honour by the poet Nguyen Dinh Chieu. Nguyen Thong, a man of letters who had joined the leadership of the anti-French resistance in the years 1860—1862, wrote in his book *Ky Xuyen Van Sao* that the entire population "appointed Truong Dinh to the military command". An inhabitant of Tan Long named Pham Tuan Phat carried a petition from patriotic notables inviting Truong Dinh to lead the fight against the foreign aggressor. Truong Dinh began organising the resistance. The territory under his control reached the sea to the Southeast and extended as far as to Hoa Cuong to the West. His troops were positioned at all strategic points. Fortifications were built everywhere to stop the French advance. Truong Dinh established his HQ's at Go Cong. He managed to manufacture cannon, raised recruits to reinforce the garrisons at Tan Hoa, and fortified defence works in anticipation of a long-term war. Next, he sent a note to village notables, exhorting them, in the name of the King, to destroy the enemy. All the notables obeyed his order. The various districts supplied him with funds and food.

These details given by Nguyen Thong testified to the prestige Truong Dinh enjoyed among the population of Cochinchina, which was deeply angered by the treason of the Court. By general consent, he became the supreme commander of the insurgent forces in the three Eastern provinces. Not only did the patriotic notables willingly submit to his authority; even the districts in the occupied zone secretly supported him.

After the 1862 treaty, the Court appointed Phan Thanh Gian and Lam Duy Hiep administrators of the provinces of Vinh Long and Binh Thuan respectively. The headquarters of the former was near Long Ho, in a village opposite the citadel of Vinh Long which was occupied by French troops. He constantly exchanged letters with Admiral Bonard and promised to do everything he could to persuade the insurgents to surrender. He also wrote to Truong Dinh, recommending that he capitulate and make peace. The latter answered that the insurgents absolutely refused to turn in their weapons to foreign mandarins<sup>1</sup>, and declared unequivocally that they "would not live under the same sky as the French army."

The French Command also advised Truong Dinh to lay down his arms and discontinue the resistance but all these proposals were categorically turned down. In the early days of February 1863, Truong Dinh wrote another letter to Phan Thanh Gian in which he publicly declared his position: "The population of the three provinces, wishing to revert to the former situation (prior to the peace treaty) has chosen me as its military commander. I cannot now do other than comply to their wishes. That is why I have prepared for war. In the East as well as in the West, I shall continue the fight. In the end, we shall defeat the invaders. As long as the court insists on maintaining the clauses signed with the

1. *Les premières années de la Cochinchine* by Paulin Vial. p.164

French, we shall oppose its orders. Given these circumstances, neither truce nor peace is possible between you and us. We hope that this will come as no surprise to you."

H. de Poyen, in his "Notice sur l'artillerie de la marine en Cochinchine", added that to please the French, Phan Thanh Gian had openly condemned the activities of the insurgents led by Truong Dinh (p. 83)

Truong Dinh mustered the bulk of his forces in Go Cong. He had the following eight big characters inscribed on the banner "Phan Lam mai quoc, Trieu dinh khi dân" (Phan Thanh Gian and Lam Duy Hiep have sold the country, the imperial court has abandoned the people). He ordered cannon posted along rivers and canals leading to insurgent bases. French vessels were fired on as soon as they ventured in. The *Alarme* commanded by Enseign Guys, attempted to advance towards Go Cong, and ran into the murderous fire of the insurgent riflemen and artillery. It lost several men and had to turn tail. Another river attack launched by Enseign Gougéard on the eastern Vam Co fared no better. The insurgents were most active in the Gia Dinh area. French positions around Saigon were subjected to repeated attacks. Bonard had to recruit 40,000 "coolies" to build a defense moat around Saigon. The dangerous situation of the French troops was described by Paulin Vial in *Les Premières Années de la Cochinchine*: "All signs showed that a revolt was about to break out".



In November 1862, Bonard and Phan Thanh Gian published another declaration calling on Truong Dinh to lay down his arms. But at that very moment, the Binh Thuan district chief led an insurgent group in an attack on Bien Hoa. French troops went in pursuit of the attackers but in vain. On December 16, 1862 "the insurrection broke out and rapidly spread all over the colony", wrote H.De Poyen (op.cit. p.79). Almost all French positions in the two provinces of Gia Dinh and Bien Hoa came under attack, especially one artillery unit 15km from Saigon. After having silently scalled the earth rampart, the insurgents charged the sentries. Capt. Thouroude was killed. On the Eastern Vam Co, three French naval units were intercepted among them one south of Tay Ninh and another at Ben Luc, this one by Nguyen Trung Truc who had sunk the "Esperance".

Meanwhile, mountain tribesmen joined with the Vietnamese and marched on Bien Hoa from Binh Thuan, and then engaged in battle with the French at several points. The population of Bien Hoa rose up and encircled all enemy posts. This solidarity between the Vietnamese and the highlanders caused enormous difficulties to the colonialists in Bien Hoa and Ba Ria. At Dong Mon, near Long Thanh, a French post fell. A puppet tri huyen (district chief) was captured.

At the beginning of 1863, the situation became more critical for the French troops. On January 1st, a marine patrol, caught in an ambush, lost two killed

and seven wounded. The Saigon — My Tho telegraph line was disconnected and the route linking these two centres cut off at several points. The inhabitants of areas surrounding Cholon and Can Giuoc also rose up against the foreign occupation. With 5,000 men under their command, two insurgent leaders gave the enemy no respite on the road between Cholon and Ben Luc, and finally established their base at Go Den.

Lespès, military commander of Can Giuoc, increased his repressive operations but failed to pacify the region.

February 1863 saw popular uprisings in My Tho. The Thuoc Nhieu post, 20km from Saigon, was violently attacked. The courage displayed by the attackers commanded the admiration of Paulin Vial. According to the author of *Les Premières Années de la Cochinchine*, "the Annamites, with arms which proved powerless against French carbines, rushed upon their adversary with a blind energy that testified to their bravery and extraordinary selfless devotion."

If Truong Dinh resisted the demobilisation order from the Emperor Tu Duc, it was nevertheless in the name of the imperial authority that he called on the people to rise up against French occupation. Nguyen Thong related a battle in which the French sustained a heavy loss of lives when lured into marshy terrain.

A note sent by Admiral Bonard to the Ministry of the Navy and dated December 13, 1862, related

that the insurgents were active in the whole territory of Cochinchina while French troops were visibly weakened by the fighting and diseases. Bonard asked, earnestly but unsuccessfully, for reinforcements, because at that time the Government of Napoleon III had become entangled in the war of aggression in Mexico. According to H. de Poyen in his *Notice sur l'artillerie de la marine en Cochinchine*, the insurgents, constantly attacking French garrisons, and more and more experienced in fighting, had turned the tide. Bonard had to mobilise the Saigon garrison to the rescue of the beleaguered posts. His note to the Ministry of the Navy dated January 8, 1863 declared that to ensure the security of Saigon it had been necessary to bring all the marines ashore, arm the French civilian personnel including the sick and the nurses, the food-store keepers and city workers. In spite of these precautions, Bonard complained that he was still unable to muster as much as 100 men fit to fight. He put the blame upon the Court of Hue which he accused of secretly supporting Truong Dinh. Scared at this allegation the Court promulgated an order relieving Truong Dinh of his functions for disobedience.

Early in February 1863, Admiral Jaures arrived in Saigon with reinforcements from Shanghai, including a detachment of Algerians and a battalion of Tagals lent by the Spanish colonialists in Manila, altogether some 1,000 well-equipped soldiers. Bonard decided to mobilize all the naval forces he then had at his disposal in Cochinchina to launch a major

offensive against Go Cong, principal base of the insurrection. The freighter "*Europe*" at the mouth of the Vam Co, in Cua Rach La, was converted into a hospitalship, supply centre and coal depot. The French sited their cannon in the neighbourhood of the "*Alarme*" moored in the Go Cong channel to fire on suspicious boats and junks. The artillery positions of the insurgents to the Northwest of Go Cong were assaulted by the French with concentrated force. To the East, the Spanish vessel "*Circe*" sailed up the Xoai Rap and attacked Lang Loc. To the West and the South, French columns moving out from Cho Gao made an attempt at encirclement. Franco-Spanish artillery under the command of General Chaumont and Colonel Palanca conducted a direct offensive against Go Cong in combination with the ship *Alarme* going upstream.

The offensive had been meticulously planned to help French troops cross the marshes, ricefields and water channels. To this end, 30 motor boats with armour plated bows capable of carrying six men a-piece were mobilised. When the need arose, these boats could be assembled to form a river pontoon, each of them being manned by six soldiers. It took only a few minutes to assemble or dismantle them. In the rear, the liaison boat "*Forbin*" blockaded the Vam Co at its entrance in Rach La, while the "*Avalanche*", the "*Dragonne*" and the gunboat No. 31 controlled the Northern arm of the Vam Co, and the *Cosmas* and gunboat No. 20 completed the blockade to the west. On February 25, 1863, at 20 hours from the bridge of the *Ondine*, the order for

the offensive was given. French ground and naval forces opened fire on the bases of the insurgents who replied vigorously. Next morning French and Spanish infantry commanded by General Chaumont seized the Tan Hoa base, then deployed southward, to attack the Trai Ca base. Insurgent chiefs Dang Kim Chung and Luu Bao Duong were killed in action. To thin out the enemy, Truong Dinh ordered his men from Tan Long, Binh Duong and Binh Long to fall upon Bien Hoa to attack the French positions at Mai Son (West of Thuan Kieu), and those from Thai Phuoc, Tuy Binh and An Long to mount simultaneous attacks on other posts. These operations failed for lack of adequate means of encirclement; and the attacking forces sustained heavy losses. Following this victory, the French massed their troops at Tan Hoa for a new offensive against the insurgents. Two columns attacked Thu Giang and Lang Loc from the sea, the third pressed towards Ky Man Giang; while the bulk of the forces delivered a direct blow at Quy Son which the insurgents had to abandon when they ran out of ammunition after three days of stiff resistance. Truong Dinh and a group of his fighters men succeeded in breaking through the siege and moved to the east coast where they established a new base at Phuoc Loc. Their troop strength, according to Paulin Vial who quotes from figures released by the French army, then numbered 10,800 men.

Despite their victory, French troops were still far from obtaining their strategic objective, i.e. the annihilation of the insurgent forces. The losses

sustained by Truong Dinh were minimal. A wise retreat made it possible for him to regroup his forces and carry on the fight. To this end, he established himself at the border of the province of Bien Hoa, in marshy islets covered with palm groves, between Xoai Rap and Dam Trang. The principal base of the insurgents was concealed at a point called Dam la toi toi ("Foliage that masks the sky") where vegetation grew thick. From this base, Truong Dinh directed the resistance. He could reach Binh Thuan by sea or through the jungle to get supplies of arms and ammunition. According to French documents, Chinese residents of Binh Thuan ran a regular arms traffic destined for the insurgents. Also according to French sources, Truong Dinh's agents penetrated deep into the occupied zone to collect funds and provisions and conduct propaganda activities. As viewed by Paulin Vial, after the fall of Go Cong, Truong Dinh's prestige actually increased among the population. Nevertheless, he had to overcome great difficulties. To keep an army of 10,800 men in provisions in a French-controlled area was no easy task. In one way or another, however, provisions continued to reach the insurgents thanks to the assistance of the people in the three provinces, but the danger of shortage of food, arms and ammunition remained a permanent menace. But in his address to the insurgent troops in the 8th month of the year Giap Ty (1874) Truong Dinh made the appeal: "Alas! our soldiers have found no further provisions since the last reserves in Tan Hoa were distributed. As to armaments, we

had a good reserve of them stored but, for lack of a constant guard, we were obliged to bury them. Even if we have to use reeds for helmets and cut bamboos to make weapons, we shall never stop fighting the aggressors."

The seizure of the insurgent bases of Tan Hoa and Go Cong was turned to account by Bonard to bring pressure to bear upon the Court of Hue to impose new peace terms. Immediately after the victory of Go Cong, a note was sent to Hue, urging immediate reception by the Court of Annam of a French delegation and the ratification of the 1862 peace treaty. The court was warned that if things did not go according to their satisfaction the French army would launch a new offensive to seize the three western provinces and threatened to lend support to the rebellion of Ta Van Phung in Tonkin.

The Court of Hue agreed to receive the French delegation. In April 1863, Admiral Bonard and Colonel Palanca, each accompanied by 10 officers and 50 men, landed at Da Nang from French vessels. Admiral Jaures dispatched 4 ships to Da Nang to back the negotiations. A court envoy arrived in Da Nang to meet Bonard, Palanca and their entourage. Paulin Vial described the reception given to the latter: they were carried to Hue in palanquins reserved for mandarins, and in Hue they were welcomed with great solemnity. A new house was put at their disposal on the bank of the Perfumed River opposite the Royal Palace. The delegation of the Court of Annam appointed by the Emperor

Tu Duc to meet the French comprised among others Phan Thanh Gian and Lam Duy Hiep.

On April 16, 1863, Bonard, Palanca and their party crossed the Perfumed River aboard a royal boat whose prow was ornamented with dragons, in accordance with strict etiquette. They were then ushered into the Royal Palace where the whole guard and all the war elephants were lined up in battle order in their honour. Led into an immense room supported by pillars of precious wood they beheld the King dominating an extraordinary crowd of ministers of all ranks, the King from whom the French were about to exact the signature of a peace treaty. After a brief address consisting of a few sentences in Vietnamese delivered on behalf of the French delegation, the King made his reply. According to Paulin Vial, it was a disastrous day for the prestige of the monarch because it marked the beginning of a new situation for the French. Until then the King of Annam and most of his high-ranking ministers had lived far from the French and followed the vicissitudes of the war only through reports from the military chiefs. At this point they came to recognise the perfection of French armaments and after this they definitely gave up any hope of resistance to the invader.

The result of this reception was the final ratification by King Tu Duc of the 1862 treaty. The King formally recognised *de jure* the three provinces of Bien Hoa, Gia Dinh and Dinh Tuong as French territory. On the French side, Bonard gave permission to an Annamite delegation led by Phan Thanh



Gian to go to France to negotiate the repurchase of the three Eastern provinces with the Court of Napoleon III.

In terms of territory, the Bonard — Tu Duc meeting yielded no new conquest to France, but morally, it was a hard blow to the population of the three Eastern provinces, and particularly to the insurgents led by Truong Dinh. The King having solemnly recognised Bien Hoa, Gia Dinh and Dinh Tuong as French territory, many of his followers no longer gave credit to the orders Truong Dinh had issued in the name of the Court. On the other hand, the Vietnamese traitors now had a legal justification for intensifying their activities. What is more, this capitulation encouraged pacifism by creating the illusion that, through negotiations, it had been possible to obtain permission to repurchase the three lost provinces. This pacifist illusion became more prevalent when Bonard decided to return the province of Vinh Long to the Court of Hue. On June 25, 1863, the commander d'Aries, on an order from Bonard, accompanied Phan Thanh Gian into the citadel of Vinh Long, then occupied by French troops, to enable Phan Thanh Gian to receive the formal hand-over. It was a good opportunity for the pacifist faction at Court to praise the correctness of the policy of compromise with France. The French, they claimed, were sincere, did not want to occupy Cochinchina, only demanded freedom to propagate the Christian religion and to

promote their trading interests. It would be possible, they argued, through negotiations, to buy back the lost provinces.

In June 1863, Phan Thanh Gian and his 60-man entourage went to France on board the *Europe*. This "repurchase" attempt could only have an inauspicious effect on the followers of Truong Dinh, at the very moment when they had just lost a series of important positions and were trying to cope with a grave crisis of arms and provisions.

The difficult situation of the insurgents was probably known to the French command. On September 25, 1863, French troops commanded by the naval officers Gougéard and Benic launched a new offensive against the region of "Dam le toi troi", the insurgent base, situated in a wild country frequented only by wild boars, tigers and bandits. Thanks very probably to the tipoffs from a traitor, French troops finally succeeded in discovering the insurgent camps. Attacked by surprise, they could offer no resistance and, in their retreat, had to abandon a large quantity of arms and ammunition. Truong Dinh himself narrowly escaped capture. A French soldier seized him by the shoulder, but Truong Dinh managed to stab the man to death and get away into the jungle.

The offensive of Gougéard and Benic further weakened the insurgent forces. As Truong Dinh was still making his presence felt in the provinces of Go Cong, Tan An, Can Giuoc and other regions of Eastern Vam Co, the French command intensified their

efforts in these regions. This encouraged the fence-sitters and the traitors to help track down the leader of the insurrection. Huynh Cong Tan otherwise known as Sergeant Tan abusing the trust of Truong Dinh, recommended him to come to Phuoc Long and make preparations for a surprise attack against Tan Hoa. Truong Dinh followed this advice. On the night of August 19 to 20, 1864, with Tan as their guide, the French troops reached the village of Phuoc Loc on the right bank of the Xoai Rap and encircled the house where Truong Dinh and 25 of his men were quartered. At dawn, the French broke into the house in an attempt to capture Truong Dinh alive. The latter resisted courageously and succeeded in making his escape. With his sabre he knocked out a French soldier, snatched his gun and took refuge in a bush. Sergeant Tan who did not lose sight of him fired and hit him in the back with a bullet. As the enemy was coming to take him prisoner, Truong Dinh took his own life with his sabre. He was then 44.

Truong Dinh's son and another insurgent chief continued the fight. The most important centre of resistance was now in Dong Thap Muoi (Plain of Reeds) where Vo Duy Duong had built a line of fortifications to resist the French. From here Vo Duy Duong established relations with other resistance groups in Chau Doc, Long Xuyen, Sadec, My Tho, Tan An, Cholon and Tay Ninh to obtain funds and provisions, buy arms and replenish his troops. Towards the end of March, 1866, the insurgents renewed their activities with the attack on the post

of Cai Nua. In April 1866, the French Command launched a new offensive against the remaining bases of resistance and occupied the Plain of Reeds. After that, nothing further was heard of Vo Duy Duong...

The conclusion must be that responsibility for the defeat of the patriotic resistance of Truong Dinh rested chiefly with the Nguyen Dynasty which created the conditions for the French to destroy the insurgent forces, hence to go on to conquer Cochinchina and the whole of Viet Nam. The mistake of the Court was that it failed to realise the difficulties that beset the colonialists in their Cochinchina Expedition and their dark designs over this region and the country as a whole. Neither did the king and his ministers fully realise the strength of the people and their fighting spirit. On the contrary, bewildered by the power of French weapons, they made one concession after another. This policy of appeasement was essentially a policy of capitulation, which certainly helped the French colonialists to suppress the resistance forces little by little and finally to occupy the whole of Viet Nam.

The struggle waged by Truong Dinh and his insurgents from 1860 to 1864 was the first general anti-colonialist resistance of the Cochinchinese people. It laid the foundation among the people for a series of resistance movements against the aggressive policies of the French colonialists.

From the review *Nghien Cuu Lich Su* (Historical Studies), nos. 77 and 78, August and September 1965.

## **Ton Duc Thang**

### **Worker from Saigon**

Ton Duc Thang, who is now President of the SRVN, has led an eventful life, including a long period of vigorous struggle against the French colonialists, and his name is closely associated with the liberation of the nation and the Vietnamese working class.

He was born in Long Xuyen (Cochinchina) in 1888, four years after the French colonialists had completed their conquest of Viet Nam. His family could not afford to send young Ton to school. Indeed, eventually he had to leave his family to go to the city to keep himself, and it was in Saigon, while working as a servant, that he began his schooling. Young as he was, he already resented social injustices he saw and felt, and he persuaded his schoolmates to boycott classes in protest against the favoritism shown by one of the teachers towards pupils who gave him presents and ran errands for him. Ton was subsequently expelled from school, and had to earn his living doing odd jobs.

He was working in a Saigon ship-repair yard attached to a technical school in 1912 when a strike broke out among the student apprentices there. When the French colonialists called in the workers of Ba Son (another shipyard) to break the strike, it spread

to this yard too. Both strikes were successful: the French were forced to make concessions. They turned their wrath against Ton Duc Thang, the organizer and leader of the movement, who was thus obliged to change his name.

During the First World War Ton worked as a mechanic in the French Navy, and was aboard the cruiser "Paris" when the French sailors in the Black Sea mutinied, refusing to fight the young Soviet State. This is how he recalls the event:

"How well I remember the day I had to leave the country! (Viet Nam—Ed.) When the pupils of the Saigon technical school and the workers at the Ba Son naval shipyard had forced their demands through, I had to disguise myself and think up another name; and I jumped a French ship to escape the manhunt the Security Service had mounted.

"And that's how I began my new life at sea. I thirsted after learning, obsessed with how to make the struggle more effective when I returned home. And I tried to get in touch with Comrade Nguyen Ai Quoc (Ho Chi Minh) many a time, but never managed to find him.

"The 'Russian Revolution', 'Bolshevism', 'Lenin', were names and ideas I first came across in some of the uncensored press the army was still allowed to read. Those papers did at least help me to see that although the Russian revolution was denigrated and scoffed at by the capitalists and imperialists, it nevertheless made them shake in their shoes. My contacts with French workers helped me to a better

understanding of it: that it was a socialist revolution, a revolution of the oppressed workers. They told me about the Paris Commune, which had also been a revolution of the workers and other labouring people, but which had ended in failure. The French workers had kept up their revolutionary traditions and struggle since then, but it was the Russians who were to be successful in their revolution first. These comrades also explained to me that all the peoples of the former Russian empire had united to carry out the revolution, and that Lenin had called for equality and co-operation among these peoples.

"All this increased my sympathy for the Russian revolution and strengthened my conviction that the workers in Russian had risen to abolish injustices that I myself had many a time been a victim of as a worker of a colonised people of yellow race. I was convinced that the justice and beauty blossoming over there in Russia were harmful only to the interests of the capitalists and imperialists.

"As they talked, the French workers and sailors made their respect for Lenin and the Russian workers very clear. They had made up their minds not to let the capitalists and imperialists use them to fight the Russian people. I too was quite determined to resist on the same count.

"When night fell, the ship was about to pass through the Straits of the Dardanelles, and the atmosphere on board was electric. Some of the comrades urged the sailors to hold a meeting as a show of resistance to the officers. 'Before the meeting starts,' they said to me, 'you hoist the red flag on the mast

so that ships of the Red Army know we're friends.' I jumped at the chance.

"Day broke as the cruiser steamed into the Black Sea. The bugle sounded. A routine affair, but this time the order did not come from the officers. The red flag was immediately hoisted on the mast. 'Russian comrades ! Our ship is still a long way from your port. You cannot see our red flag yet. But from the middle of the Black Sea it flutters our greetings to you. I hope that our ship will reach your port with the flag still flying ; then I can jump ashore to join your revolution and learn how to go about things when I get back to my own country.'"

When the cruiser returned to Toulon, Ton Duc Thang took part in the struggle of the workers and soldiers in the port. He returned to Viet Nam in 1920, but had still not gained complete understanding of the organisation of the party of the working class. Nevertheless he was the first to spread sympathy with the Russian revolution and understanding for the French working class in South Viet Nam. Above all, he organised the first bases of the clandestine Association of Workers, in Saigon-Cholon. This was a very important step, both for the workers' movement, and in general political thinking in Viet Nam. From 1921 to 1925, the associations organised by Ton were active in the national movement. They preserved their original structure until 1926, when they merged with the Association of Revolutionary Youth (Thanh Nien Cach Mang Dong Chi Hoi).



The workers' movement in Viet Nam was developing rapidly in 1929 when Ton Duc Thang was arrested by the French colonialists, sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment and transported to Poulo Condore. During the 17 years of constant suffering, repression and privation he spent in prison, Ton remained an example of courage and valour, hard at work all the time leading his comrades in the struggle.

When the insurrection of August 1945 triumphed, a joyful population in the South welcomed the release of the old fighter.

Ton was an energetic leader of the Resistance in Nam Bo.<sup>1</sup> He was always to be found among the fighters at the front or the munitions carriers. He succeeded many a time in penetrating areas encircled by the enemy, staying there to organize and cover the pull-out of our units.

In January 1946, Ton Duc Thang was elected to the National Assembly of the DRVN by the population of Saigon-Cholon. Since then he has worked closely with the Party's Central Committee, and has held important positions in the National Assembly, the Fatherland Front and the Government.

He has been Minister of the Interior, Chairman of the Standing Committee of the DRVN National Assembly, Chairman of the Central Patriotic Emulation Committee, President of the Lien Viet National Front, President of the Viet Nam — USSR

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1. Southern Viet Nam.

Friendship Association, Honorary President of the Viet Nam General Confederation of Labour, Chairman of the National Assembly Standing Committee, Chairman of the Central Committee of the Viet Nam Fatherland Front, President of the DRVN, and is now President of the SRVN. On three occasions he has led parliamentary delegations on visits to the USSR, China and other socialist countries, contributing to the strengthening of friendship between the Vietnamese people and people of fraternal countries.

The Vietnamese People's Congress for the Defence of Peace unanimously elected Ton Duc Thang Honorary Chairman of the Viet Nam Peace Committee as a tribute to his having laid the foundations of the peace movement in Viet Nam, and having been awarded the Lenin Peace Prize. In July 1958, the Stockholm Conference for Disarmament and International Co-operation re-elected him to the World Peace Council.

Ton Duc Thang's life has been one of self-abnegation, dedicated to the cause of the working class, to the people, and to the country.

*Adapted from Viet Nam Advances  
No. 10, 1958*

# NOTES AND DOCUMENTS



AMENDMENT TO THE ADMINISTRATIVE  
STATUS OF SAIGON  
(1862 — 1945)

Before the French occupation, Nam Ky comprised six provinces: three eastern provinces (Bien Hoa, Gia Dinh and Dinh Tuong) and three western provinces (Vinh Long, Chau Doc or An Giang, and Ha Tien). These provinces were set up in 1832 (thirteenth year of the reign of Minh Mang).

Following the signing of the June 5, 1862 treaty, the three eastern provinces, together with Poulo Condore, became French Cochinchina, to which the three western provinces were added in 1867.

*I — From 1862 to 1875*

The capital of Gia Dinh, one of the three eastern provinces, was Saigon. On April 4, 1867, the Saigon municipality was set up with a municipal office presided over by a municipal commission. On July 8, 1869 another decree was issued enforcing that of April 4, 1867 replacing the Municipal Commissioner with a Mayor.

Gia Dinh had three prefectures (*phu*) and eight districts (*huyen*). The *phu* of Tan Binh (capital: Saigon), governed three districts: Binh Duong (capital: Saigon), Tan Long (capital: Cho Lon) and Phuoc Loc (capital: Can Giuoc).

## *II — From 1876 to 1900*

On January 5, 1876, on the basis of the administrative organization in France, the Governor, Commander-in-chief divided Nam Ky, then considered a French department, into 4 administrative sections with 19 wards each headed by an administrator.

The Saigon section comprised five wards:

a) Saigon (becoming Gia Dinh ward in 1885) covering the territory of Tan Binh *phu*, formerly Gia Dinh province.

b) Tay Ninh (territory of Tay Ninh *phu*, formerly Gia Dinh province),

c) Thu Dau Mot (territory of Phuoc Long *phu*, formerly Bien Hoa province)

d) Bien Hoa (Phuoc Chanh *huyen* and Long Thanh *huyen*, formerly Bien Hoa province)

e) Ba Ria (territory of Phuoc Tuy *phu*, formerly Bien Hoa province).

On December 13, 1880, the Governor of Cochinchina signed a decree setting up a 20th ward administered by a Director of the Interior. It included the towns of Saigon and Cholon and some villages.

On January 12, 1888, the Governor General of Indochina signed a decree removing these villages from Saigon and Cholon.

## *III — Setting up of Saigon-Cholon region*

(April 27, 1931 (Decree of the President of the French Republic) and December 16, 1931 (Decree of the Governor General of Indochina).

The region included the cities of Saigon and Cholon with their suburbs. It was placed under the authority of the administrator of Saigon-Cholon region assisted by an administrative council. Some powers of the Saigon municipal council, of the Cholon municipal commission of the mayors of Saigon and Cholon, were transferred to the administrator and administrative council of Saigon-Cholon region.

In 1941 (decree of December 19 of the President of the French Republic and decree of December 28 of the Governor General of Indochina), the former region of Saigon-Cholon, the cities of Saigon and Cholon, merged into a single administrative unit still called Saigon-Cholon region. That new region had a unified budget;—its new administrative council took charge of the functions of the municipal council of Saigon and the municipal commission of Cho Lon—the functions of mayors of Saigon and Cholon were abolished, and were taken over by the Administrator of Saigon-Cholon region.

After Vu Van Tinh  
*Nghien Cuu Lich Su* (Historical Studies) Review  
No. 146, 1972

MUNICIPAL ADMINISTRATION  
IN INDOCHINA (1936)

(Saigon, Hanoi, Haiphong, Cholon, Phnom Penh,  
Tourane)

1. Municipal council (12 Frenchmen, 6 natives)  
Political questions were not within the province  
of the organization

2. Mayors and deputy-mayors

a) Supervision of special councils

1. Public health
2. Private companies
3. Benefit societies
4. Taxes
5. Finances
6. Litigation
7. Market regulation
8. Entertainment

b) Local services (covered by local budgets)

1. Land survey and topography
2. Penitentiaries
3. Immigration
4. Direct taxes
5. Weights and measures
6. Piloting
7. Shipping
8. Buddhist studies and art.

THOMAS E. ENNIS  
French Policy and Developments  
in Indochina (The University of Chicago  
Press, 1936)



**STATISTICS OF THE THIRTIES DAILY WAGES  
IN THE SAIGON — CHOLON REGION FROM 1931  
TO 1936 (in piastres)<sup>1</sup>**

Item	1931	1932	1933	1934	1936
Skilled workers.....	1.38	1.35	1.16	1.08	1.07
Unskilled workmen	0.64	0.59	0.53	0.52	0.47
Unskilled work- women	0.42	0.48	0.35	0.40	0.41

**WAGES OF "COOLIES" AT THE DISTILLERIES  
OF INDOCHINA BINH TAY FACTORY (CHOLON)<sup>2</sup>**

Types of work (transport of 1000 bags)	Overseer and coolie (pias- tres)	Wages in 1927 and 1928 (piastres)	Difference left to corpo- ral (piastres)	Wages in 1935 and 1936 (piastres)	Difference left to corpo- ral (piastres)	Rates of wage reduction (piastres)
From arroyo to storehouse	coolie	32 24	8	22 9.5	12.50	60.5
From store house to	coolie	35		7		80
	coolie	35		5		86
From storehouse to still house rice mill	coolie	35		6		74
Bags of bran of rice mill	coolie	23		7		66

1. Report of Inspector of colonies Tupinier.

2. « La Lutte », January 14, 1937.

**INDEX OF THREE MONTHS' EXPENDITURES  
OF AN AVERAGE WORKING CLASS**  
(In piastres, 1925 : 100) 1936-1937<sup>1</sup>

Quarter	Foods	Lodging	Other expen- ses	General index
<b>1936</b>				
1st quarter	64	99	88	77
2nd quarter	65	98	88	78
3rd quarter	65	98	88	78
4th quarter	75	99	96	85
<b>1937</b>				
1st quarter	82	104	98	91
2nd quarter	79	105	99	89
3rd quarter	89	106	99	95

**MINIMUM DAILY WAGES FIXED BY THE JUNE 1937  
COMMISSION**  
(in piastres)

Region	Men	Women	Children
West and Centre	0.33	0.25	0.15
Saigon and Cho Lon	0.45	0.35	0.20
East	0.38	0.28	0.18

1. Annual Statistics of Indochina, 1936-1937, p. 186.

## PROFESSIONS CALLING

1. *Workers at the Saigon ship yard (1937)*

Total strength: 1285

— Employees... 235 or 18.1% of total

— Skilled workers... 840 or 65.6% of total

(including: 127 fitters, 147 braziers, 112 carpenters, 105 electricians, 103 tinmen and iron-smiths, 49 drillers, 43 turners...)

— Coolies... 210 or 16.3% of total.

2. Workers of 38 enterprises in Saigon-Cholon <sup>1</sup>.

Categories	1931	1932	1933	1934	1936
Skilled workers *	4,106	3,768	2,820	3,494	3,564
Unskilled workmen.	5,295	2,261	2,435	2,243	1,773
Unskilled workwomen.	402	295	184	521	652
Skilled coolies.	332	609	208	891	1,231
Children and apprentices.		433	267	350	356
Foremen and overseers	312	240	201	264	242
Total.	10,447	7,606	6,115	7,763	7,818
* Skilled workers according to present day designation					

1. Report of Inspector of colonies Tupinier on social conflicts and work payment in Cochinchina, March 9, 1937. Direction of Control.

**RICE EXPORTS**  
Through Saigon port in 1934 and 1935\*

Countries	1934		1935	
	metric tons	percent-age	metric tons	percent-age
France	698,738	44.3	348,563	20.3
French colonies	109,722	6.9	110,547	6.4
Europe	79,377	5	80,841	4.7
South Africa	14,704	0.9	10,255	0.6
USA and Cuba	15,672	0.9	16,619	1
Hongkong	343,313	21.7	437,372	25.5
China	100,491	6.3	433,624	25.2
Japan	1,733	0.1	2,137	0.1
Singapore	21,099	1.3	48,107	2.8
British India	102,442	6.5	119,097	6.9
Dutch Indies	44,340	2.8	68,683	4
Sundry	3,714	0.2	24,916	1.5
Costing	40,194	2.5	17,252	1
	1,575,539	99.4	1,718,013	100

\* Annual Report for 1935 from American Consul, Saigon (January 20, 1936)

THOMAS E. ENNIS  
*French Policy and Developments in Indochina*  
(The University of Chicago Press — 1936)

**EXPORT OF RUBBER**  
**(Through Saigon port) \***  
**(in metric tons)**

Countries	1934**	1935**
France	7,552	11,062
Singapore	3,517	1,872
USA	5,596	9,166
Japan	2,267	2,813
Great Britain	794	695
Belgium	151	681
Italy	419	303
Germany	321	1,717
China	48	536
Netherlands	10	177
Spain	39	54
Rumania	5	...
Czechoslovakia	...	61
	20,719	29,137

\* Annual Report, 1935 from American Consul, Saigon (January 20, 1936)

\*\* Figures released by Saigon Chamber of Commerce.

DETAINEES AT SAIGON CENTRAL PRISON  
(up to 1939, 1st January) <sup>1</sup>

1925	761
1930	777
1931	1,600
1932	1,823
1933	1,356
1934	887
1935	878
1936	797
1937	749
1938	820

Basic figures of the Annual Statistics of Indochina, published in 1931-1932, 1934-1936, 1936-1937, 1937-1938.

1. Additional figures : Report of Inspector Le Grégam AOM.2490, Report of Inspector Bourgeois Gavardin (1935-1938), Direction of Control.

*Communist militants of the thirties*

## IN THE DEATH CELL

PHAM HUNG <sup>1</sup>

When I was taken into the death cell at the Saigon central prison, there were already three common-law offenders there also under sentence of death: Thanh and Ro, from the prison of Poulo Condore convicted of murder; the third, Mot Ram, charged with murder in Gia Dinh. Knowing that I was a political prisoner they sympathized with me from the very first moments. They told me, "Mr. Little has been in this cell. That copy of the ballad Kim Van Kieu is his".

Ly Tu Trong<sup>2</sup> had been affectionately called "Monsieur Petit" by non-political prisoners in this death cell and even by policemen and guards, out of respect for him.

So, comrade Trong had been here. In a corner of the cell, there were still some pages that had turned yellow. These turned out to be from the famous

1. Pham Hung, now member of the Political Bureau of the C.C. of the Communist Party of Viet Nam.

2. Young communist sentenced to death for killing a French policeman at a meeting organized by the Indo-chinese Communist Party on Feb. 9, 1936.

ballad left behind by Trong. Our great national poet had been here with this combatant in this death cell right up to the moment he went to the scaffold. Grieved at heart, I gathered these few pages.

The day Trong was executed, I was still a prisoner at My Tho jail. On the day before, all the detainees held a protest hunger strike. I was held in My Tho on a charge of "attempted assassination during a demonstration, arson and disturbance of the peace."

This was the first May Day demonstration to be held in broad daylight in My Tho in 1931. The demonstrators captured, tried and executed a "huong quan", village official, on account of his crimes against the people.

After that I was taken to different prisons. Finally I was put in the death cell after the special court had pronounced a death sentence against me. I was then 20 years of age.

The cell was a small room about 3 by 6 metres, sealed by four walls and an iron gate. In one of the walls, a piece of iron, riddled with holes which were too small to push a cigarette through, served as a "window". It was dark in the cell, and a fire-coloured light was kept blazing in on us throughout the day. It was terribly hot. We remained naked all the time. We lay flat on the cement ground, each with one of his feet held firm in the stock which ran the length of the cell. Every two or three months, policemen unlocked



the stocks so that the other foot could take its turn. Each time I had the position of my foot changed all other prison cells were kept firmly locked up, and troops, guards and policemen were mustered as if it was a military exercise. Only then did they dare unlock the stocks.

The common-law death convicts had given up hope. Convinced that they would die anyway, they opened their mouths only to curse. Their fury was such that the policemen themselves were sometimes terrified. The guards, mostly natives of Corsica, were afraid of the prisoners too. Thanh, Ro and Ram cursed them almost non-stop. Each time the guards opened the cell to give food to the prisoners, they got a cursing. Once one of them even had the chamber pot full of excrement overturned on his head.

I was told that once a French priest visited them in the cell. "Is there anything I can do to help you, my children?" he asked. From the end of the cell, a prisoner sat up and politely answered, "Come in Father, your son would like to talk to you."

No sooner had the priest come in than the prisoners seized him and pulled his beard, shouting: "Stay here with us, Father "

I was not in favour of such actions. Among themselves the policemen and guards said "Don't worry about them, they are only mad dogs." Afraid that

they would think of communists sentenced to death likewise, I said to Thanh, Ro and Ram, "We live to do good things, not evil. If we can do them even here, we will leave behind a good reputation. Though we are going to be guillotined, if we keep our dignity we will leave behind a good impression. The guillotine is in the next room... even so we must behave correctly, and live like humans. Only in so doing will we command respect; our judges will then see that their law cannot subdue or brutalise us, not even the introduction of capital punishment."

Silently, Thanh, Ro and Ram listened to me. I went on, "What we live for is where we differ. We are working for the revolution. I have been in different jails and become acquainted with many common-law prisoners. In general, I observe, they listen to the political prisoners. A man must behave like a human being. We shall never give the colonialists grounds to hold us in contempt. And even when we are going to die, they must still respect us..."

I started organising the cell. Things could not run smoothly if one acted on impulse in dealing with the guards, I thought. We had better appoint a delegate to speak to them. Thanh, Ro and Ram agreed and unanimously chose me. Order began to reign in the cell. Each morning our cook, who was a prisoner too, but not condemned to death, came and asked what we wanted for our meals, and I gave the orders. Formerly, Thanh, Ro and Ram liked to nag at the cook, "Listen, we want a fat cock. Make sure that it's

a live one, and we must hear him crow before you kill him."

It has long been a rule to give good food to prisoners sentenced to death, before they are executed. So, at each meal, we had ham, fried chops, roasted chicken or French dishes if we liked. If there was anything we wanted, we had only to ask.

We ate rice crust only when it was toasted a nice golden brown. Our comrades outside were correct when they said "we eat scorched rice crust with a coconut shell spoon."

Near the death cell, there was a ward for women prisoners, political and non-political, and we could watch them from the door. Many women had their children with them, and it was sad to see those tiny creatures playing in the prison grounds. I suggested to my prison mates we might put aside part of our daily food ration for them. At each meal, we distributed a ration, quite a good lot, to the children in the women prisoners' cell. It became a habit with the children to look at us from afar, waiting for their share when it happened that our meals were a bit late.

Seeing that they now received less abuse and cursings, the policemen and prison guards began to come nearer to the cell. They knew that this was thanks to the presence of a political prisoner, and began to show interest in me. A prison guard, Alexandre by name, who claimed to be a member of the Socialist Party, often came and chatted with me. Once he asked me, thoughtfully, "one of the things that amaze me most and that I cannot understand is why

the communists are always in a happy mood, even though they know they have not long to live. When they are still at large, they are good fighters. Kept in prison, they behave correctly."

I said to him, "So you think capital punishment should make us lose our reason and become frantic with terror. It may bring madness and despair to those who have no aim in life, no political ideal, and believe in no future. As for us, we can face our future with confidence: we will be executed but we know that our real future will be independence for our country. We know perfectly well that by making the revolution to overthrow your regime, we run the risk of being arrested or killed. To be shoved in this cell was no surprise to me."

Later, I had the chance to meet Alexandre again as guard on Poulo Condore. He no longer brutalized the prisoners and even told me the news he had heard on radio broadcasts.

To pass the time in the cell we played cards and dice we had made ourselves. The cards were pieces of old cardboard hand drawn and the dice were made of kneaded hardened bread. We smoked and applied the cigarette to the wall to make soot for the black spots on the dice. We crumpled the wrapping paper from cigarette packets and pushed it into the dice to make red spots.

After meals we chatted then played cards or chess. It was true "gambling": those who lost the games were obliged to eat as much food as they could. In the central prison there was a library for the French.

I borrowed some books and after having read them, I summarized the stories for Thanh, Ro and Ram, to their great delight. We read such books as "Les Misérables" by Victor Hugo and "Les trois mousquetaires" by Alexandre Dumas.

I then thought of helping them to learn to read and write. When I asked them if they wanted to learn a few words, they burst out, "Heavens! What's the use? We are going to leave this world! We are sticking our heads on the guillotine, it's a bit late to talk about learning. Oh no, thanks."

"Don't talk like that. If we reckon we are still of any use to society, we must work so long as we are still alive. Learning is working too. Here we learn in order to be able to read books. This gives us pleasure and helps us to understand many interesting things. We will lose nothing, even if we are to die. On the contrary we will gain much."

I then arranged for the purchase of illustrated plays. There is hardly any South Vietnamese who does not like the Cai Luong, our modern popular theatre. Thanh, Ro and Ram could understand the plays from the illustrations but not the story. I read in a loud voice. Lying by my side, they raised their heads to hear better. From time to time, I stopped reading.

*Here they start on a Tau Ma tune, let's sing the tau ma.<sup>1</sup>*

1. Song with precipitated rythm.

The trio then sang the tune at the top of their voices.

*Here they start on a Nam Khach tune. Let's sing the Nam Khach.*

And the trio were quick to respond to my request.

Each day, I taught them a few words. After about three months, they were able to spell and do some reading. Their interest in learning increased.

"Brother Hung, shall we get on," they would say each morning as soon as they woke up.

They soon read very well, and each, lying at full length, read his own book. Without the stocks, one would have taken the cell for a study occupied by poor students.

We began acting the plays. We distributed the parts among ourselves, turned the garbage can into a drum, and sang and managed to produce every tone of the human voice, tenor, soprano, bass, etc... Hilarity prevailed in the cell. Not knowing what was happening, the guards rushed to our cell one night and, to their great surprise, they saw us lying stark naked with our legs still in the stocks, stroking an imaginary beard and singing. I said to them, "Off with you. There is nothing to be worried about. It's terribly boring in here and we act plays to amuse ourselves."

After 6 or 7 months of detention, the death sentence is usually either confirmed or rescinded, and commuted to imprisonment for life with hard labour. I had been kept here for not less than 7

months. Mot Ram had already gone to the guillotine. Before his execution, he was transferred to another cell. One morning, just before dawn, feet pounded along the passage outside. I heard Ram's voice, "Brother Hung, I am going to be guillotined. Good health to you all, goodbye."

I was now alone in the cell, and was later joined by two of my comrades, O and Cau. We were still left in ignorance of our fate. But experience indicated that if your sentence were to be rescinded, this would already have happened. We had been here for 7 months, and we were pretty sure that our sentences were still in force. Discussions were held on how to preserve our dignity at the time of our execution. Knowing that before going to the guillotine, they used to ask about our last wish. We decided before hand to ask them to let us arrange our turns for the guillotine among ourselves. It was decided that Cau would be the first to go to the guillotine. Next was comrade O, and I would come last. Cau and O told me, "You will be the last to mount the scaffold. So you will witness the deaths of those who precede you. This amounts to dying several times."

Told by Pham Hung.

Written by Tran Dinh

(Translated from the Vietnamese)

## READY TO FACE THE GUILLOTINE

LE VAN LUONG\*

At nineteen I was a worker in Nha Be and one of the leaders of the workers' strike there. On that occasion, the strikers beat a foreman to death, seriously injured a cook and seized several guns from the troops who were rushed in to suppress the strike. I was arrested and summoned before "The Trial of the Indochinese Communist Party".

Because of my refusal to plead guilty to any of their charges, I was confined to a pitch-dark cellar for twenty-one days. I could not make out anything inside. On the fifth day of my confinement, I realized that at each meal two mess-tins of rice and other food were thrown in for me. I had thought up till then that there was only one.

The court designated as "political prisoners" those who organized and edited revolutionary newspapers. As for those involved in strikes, seizures of paddy, beatings of soldiers,... they were indiscriminately accused of "banditry and offences against public security", and these were not considered political offences. We were not allowed to plead. I had only time to say, before being taken away, "You behead people who are allowed to say only 'Yes' or 'No'. Isn't that strange justice?"

\* Le Van Luong is now member of the Political Bureau of the C.C. of the Communist Party of Viet Nam.



Hung was able to finish his sentence, saying, "This is strange justice, I have one head which has been sentenced to be chopped off my shoulders, and now you pronounce a second death sentence against me. I don't know where you will find the other head."

Tu was even more stubborn in his statement, "You have slandered our Party. Therefore, I must be allowed to defend it first. As far as I am concerned, I will answer you later." And he persisted in his demand to defend his Party.

During the trial, the International Relief Association and the French communist Party asked progressive barristers in Saigon to act as our defence counsels. A barrister said, "I ask the court to consider my client's youth and lack of mature thinking..."

One of the comrades stood up and intervened, "No, this is a faulty defence. I don't agree with it. Although we are young, we know what we're doing: we are determined to free the nation and to free the working class. How can people dare to call this lack of mature thinking?"

Finally, the court pronounced the verdicts. On "political offenders", sentences of deportation for life, imprisonment ranging from fifteen to twenty years, and confinement in Poulo Condore were imposed. On "offenders charged with murder and rebellion", like Le Quang Sung, six other persons and I, death sentences were passed. For comrade Hung,

in addition to the formidable death penalty, a 20 years' sentence of hard labour was imposed.

One day, Sung and I were taken to the Saigon Central prison.

Upon arrival at the death row, I heard a very familiar voice calling, "Luong, Luong, here is your mate; we are to share this cell together." The person calling me was Hung. He was enjoying his turn of sitting close to the door of the cell. At that time, prisoners in this section had demanded that the door of the cell be opened a few times a day to let the light in and to enable them to enjoy a look outside.

Thanh and Ro also greeted us, "Come in, the cell is rather narrow to hold all of us, but it doesn't matter."

We were in all seven souls living in one cell. Hung jokingly proposed, "We must order a banquet for tomorrow, and have a drink together."

In our prison, if we wanted to have drinks on Sundays, we would send for the orderly and say to him, "We have a bad cold, is there anything to drink?" The orderly would understand what we meant, and would bring in spirits from the dispensary.

Some days later, the French chief guard came in. He told Hung, "The appeal court agrees with the

death-sentence passed on you, but as there has been a more recent trial, the decision from Paris has not yet arrived. I am telling you this because I know you are not afraid of death. I have bought some rum and cigars, one glass of rum and one cigar for each of you."

We had been told that the French gave rum and cigars to prisoners sentenced to death just before the execution to cheer them up.

Hung asked, "Why can't we have them now? The execution might happen at any time".

The chief guard brought us some rum and three cigars. Hung then asked, "We are seven people here and there are provisions for three only. It is not enough."

The additional shares were brought in. We all smoked our cigars and soon the cell was filled with smoke.

For some days Hung was appearing in court and was absent from "home". Thanh and Ro resumed their old habit of cursing and beating the guards. The latter came to us and complained about this. After inquiry, we learnt that the guards had been rude to them.

Nevertheless, that was not the root cause. Since Mot Dam had been executed, Thanh's and Ro's nervous tension had increased. They guessed that their execution day was approaching and let fly their violent tempers. We sought to appease them by good advice. We exposed the evils of society which had led them to crime. Thanh and Ro spoke of the

days they had spent in Poulo Condore and of the bad treatment by the chief guard and other jailers there. In Poulo Condore the regime was extremely harsh. Many detainees committed suicide. When a murder occurred, some of them would claim to be the author in order to finish up with a "death sentence". I proceeded to explain political matters bit by bit each day and quite mildly, until Thanh and Ro finally understood.

After a time, the prison guards asked us, "Do you want to lodge an appeal?"

"Yes," we replied, "all the more so, as we have committed no offence and death sentences have been imposed on us."

We subsequently signed applications for appeal.

Barrister Cancelleri, who had been sent by the International Relief Association to act as our defence counsel, often visited us. We were told that he had been a member of the French Communist Party and had left it. However, he remained a Party sympathizer. He came each time with gifts of food and cigars. One day, he handed us some money. We refused it.

"We have everything we need. You have been kind to us and have defended us."

"The money has been sent to you by the International Relief Association," Cancelleri replied.

"Has it? We must accept it then. Please convey our thanks to the International Relief Association."

Cancelleri told us that the French Communist Party was waging a campaign demanding a annulment of the death sentences imposed on us. We were already aware of this since we read French newspapers.

How had the French papers reached us? When we asked to borrow some to read, the chief guard dared not lend us Saigon papers, but he handed us copies of *L'Intransigeant*, the *Marseillais* and *Paris Soir*.

"These are the papers I have and as a special favour I will lend them to you," he said.

From then on, we read newspapers every day. We were particularly interested in the Leipzig trial of comrade Dimitrov by the Hitlerite fascists. The trial, which echoed throughout the world, was reported with abundant details by bourgeois papers. In our cell, we closely followed its development, even more closely than those living outside the prison. We read comrade Dimitrov's defence statements and learnt the way he based his defence on existing reactionary legislation to defend his Party and to accuse imperialism. We learned many things from the spirit and the attitude of the Communist militant who defended the Communist International and the Bulgarian Communist Party and nation, who pointed an accusing finger in the face of the Goerings and the Hitlers, we learnt from his experience of struggle in court. French bourgeois papers described him as "Dimitrov, the brave man".

Reading these reports filled us with joy and pride, and we felt more mature.

"Had we been armed with this experience before," we said among ourselves, "we would have given the French the kind of answers they deserved in court the other day".

During that period, we succeeded in establishing communication with political prisoners in the front of the prison building. We borrowed books from the prison library and wrote invisibly in them using boiled rice liquid. We informed the comrades in the other building of the titles of the books concerned. They then borrowed them and painted on a page, previously agreed between us, with a solution of tincture of iodine to make the letters appear. By this method, we were informed of the situation outside. As we were awaiting the day of our execution, we did not give any information on our personal situation.

Behind our cell was a row of papaws. Sparrows often came there and cheered us with their twittering. One day, petty-offence prisoners came with long sticks and poles to chase them away. They said they had received the order from the chief guard to protect the papaws and to keep the ripe fruit for us. We invited them to come in, and told them, "If you chase the birds away we shall lose the pleasure of listening to their twittering. This doesn't matter, however. In anycase you should keep the ripe papaws for the children in the women's cell. They are innocent and yet are confined."

One day, the jailers brought us a large quantity of good food. We did not know where the food came from. Later, we realized that they had taken it away from the parents and wives of petty-offence prisoners who had brought these gifts to their sons and husbands in prison. We then said to the jailers, "Those people are leading a harder life than we. You mustn't take anything away from them".

The jailers admired our conduct more and more with each passing day. Some of them were moved to the point of telling us of their repentance and apologizing.

We told them, "We are fighting the French and the imper' lists, we feel no enmity towards you."

Whole days were spent in entertainment and fun, playing games, singing songs and performing operas. When the bell door was open and people walked past, we always found something pleasant or funny to say to them.

At night when we heard street-vendors shouting their wares we jokingly repeated their calls." Who will buy coconut juice with sugar?" We then felt as if we were actually walking along the pavement. Noises coming from outside revived memories of street and factory activities and we felt an unbearable nostalgia for them.

One day, Thanh and Ro fell ill, although not seriously. The prison warders came and told them to

go to the prison hospital. This was a pretext to take the men to their execution. Before leaving, they spoke to us, "You said earlier that before we die we should keep our awareness and shout slogans. Now tell us some of these."

They had guessed what would happen to them. We, too, shared their apprehension. If they had lived, they would have become honest men.

Some days later, at five o'clock in the morning, we heard slogans echoing from the distance — faint, but quite perceptible: "Down with French imperialism!" "Long live the Indochinese Communist Party!" The slogans were shouted calmly. We all heard them, and knew that Thanh and Ro were going to their death. Silently we glanced at each other.

The chief guard came in.

"Your friends have bid you farewell. Did you hear them?" he asked.

"Yes"

"There are two cigars left... will you smoke them?"

We took the two remaining cigars from the packet which had been given to Thanh and Ro that morning, and before lighting them held them in our fingers a long time with many thoughts chasing through our heads.

The chief guard broke the silence: "The two men are not of your group, why then did they shout slogans?"

"There is nothing strange in this. They have realized where good sense lies. Every thinking person will condemn you. Are you aware of that?"



With an uneasy smile he went away. It takes a long time for people like him to understand.

Six months elapsed. For thirteen months Hung had been in the condemned cell. It was my sixth month in prison. We discussed plans for everything — how to walk to the guillotine and how to face it, so that when death came, we should die with dignity. We asked the guards for a description of the guillotine. They provided us with every detail, and asked me why we wanted to know.

"I want to know thoroughly," I said, "so that the execution can go as smoothly as possible."

We asked them about the proceedings and the way they take prisoners to the execution. They explained everything.

Usually this question is put to the victim, "Do you wish to have the last rites?" (A Catholic priest is always present at executions).

Our answer would be: "What should I want them for?"

"Is there anything you want to say?", the French would ask, because they presumed that when the prisoner faced death, he might lose his self-control and confess, hoping that this confession would save his soul. The French were very shrewd indeed, but they should not have expected us to confess anything. They would ask this question. "Do you want to leave a message for your family?" Well, a question like this was welcome. According to imperialist regulations, each prisoner was allowed to write one letter only. For this we had our plan: Le Van Sung's

wife, named Sau Diec, was a courageous militant who loved him very much. It would be better that Le Van Sung wrote to his wife. Hung and I could, on behalf of the comrades, write to Ngo Gia Tu and other comrades in Poulo Condore, who were our close and most cherished comrades-in-arms.

We prepared our statements to be made before the guillotine in advance. They were aimed at condemning imperialism, making propaganda for the Party and exhorting the masses. As they would not allow the worker-peasant masses to attend our execution and there would not be much time, we prepared something straight forward and concise. We chose the four following slogans: "Down with French imperialism," "Long live the Indochinese Communist Party", "Long live the Indo-Chinese Revolution", and "Long live the Communist International".

We then learnt to sing "The International." The song was to be sung in rhythm and in unison in the execution yard. At that time "The International" had already been translated into the Vietnamese language. The version of the time did not differ very much from the current one, apart from two or three words.

From then on, we went to bed early at night, because the condemned men were usually taken for execution at about 5 o'clock in the morning. We wanted to get up early and have time to wash ourselves, comb our hair and dress properly before the final blow.

These were the preparations for the day of our execution, which we carried out each day. Nevertheless, nobody came to take us away.

In the seventh month of my imprisonment, the chief guard came one day and said, "Why have you not applied for an amnesty?" "Why should we do so", we retorted, "we have committed no crime. To make revolutions is not a crime. We wish to appeal, to oppose your justice and your law, but we will never apply for an amnesty. It depends on you whether you behead us or not".

The chief guard and the attorney general in turn came and sought to influence me, arguing, "You are only 19 years old, there is still a long life ahead of you. Besides you have had an education..."

These words were repeated over and over again by the chief guard and the attorney general for two days. We could not bear their repetitious advice, and sent them away and had done with them.

Cancelleri also came (this might have been under pressure from the attorney general).

"You have not applied for an amnesty and have defended your prestige as Party members," he told us. "This is a lofty attitude. However, in my opinion, you should apply for an amnesty. It is only a matter of proceeding which does not affect nor harm the honour of the Party."

"Up to now you have assisted us in many ways," we replied. "We thank you very much for that, but this time, we ask you to accept our refusal of your advice."

At that time, the movement in France for the release of political prisoners in Indo-China was very strong. And the imperialists wanted us to sign applications for an amnesty. We would do no such thing ! At night we continued to practice singing and went to bed as early as before. In the morning, we rose early, dressed and combed our hair, and waited for the final call.

\*  
\* \*

About a month later, the chief guard entered, rubbing his hands.

"Well, now... it is finished," he said.

"What is finished?" we asked.

"It is now over for you, you will go tomorrow," he said.

"We shall go tomorrow, shall we ? Well, we are ready. We have been waiting for a long time already," we answered.

"No, I mean that you will leave here for another place... to Poulo Condore."

The French Communist Party launched a vigorous campaign, demanding an amnesty for "the 10,000 political prisoners in Indo-China, especially the cancellation of ten death sentences." This struggle, inspired by proletarian internationalism, eventually won. But when the chief guard reported the news to us, he juggled with words to see if there was any sign of apprehension among us. Later,

Cancelleri showed us press articles and parliamentary statements by French communist deputies. We then realized clearly that through the 7 to 8 months of our imprisonment, the French workers and people had waged a relentless struggle to save our lives.

Hung, Sung and I, said to one another, "We owe our lives to the French proletariat."

In the early days of January 1934, we left the Saigon Central Prison for Poulo Condore. Leaving an underground hell, we landed in an earthly hell. For many years, Hung and I shared the same stocks and fetters as we had done in the condemned cell. We resumed our militant activities and struggle. Hung was a very vigorous protester. His prison book was covered with red markings: one for each of the innumerable punishments he had received. Following the triumph of the Revolution, our Party and Government sent a ship to take us back to the mainland. We returned to Saigon at the very moment the French started their hostilities there on September 23, 1945.

We then began a new struggle...

After LE VAN LUONG

## THE NAM KY INSURRECTION (November 23, 1940)

*On Nov. 23, 1940, in Nam Ky (South Viet Nam) an armed uprising erupted. On the occasion of its 30th anniversary, our correspondent interviewed Mrs NGUYEN THI THAP, member of the C.C. of the Communist Party of Viet Nam, Honorary President of the Viet Nam Women's Union, and one of those who took a direct part in the uprising. The following are the questions and answers.*

**QUESTION:** You took part in the Nam Ky (or Nam Bo) insurrection. Would you please tell us about the situation at that time, and the cause of the rebellion?

**ANSWER:** The Nam Ky insurrection which broke out 30 years ago, has left a deep impression on the Vietnamese people in the South. Its outbreak was not a mere accident.

Since the French colonialists imposed their domination on Viet Nam, our people had never ceased to rebel and to organise for their liberation. As Nam Bo\* was conquered by the French aggressors nearly two decades earlier than Bac Bo\* and Trung Bo\*, our Southern people were the first to resist the French. Truong Cong Dinh, Nguyen Trung Truc and Nguyen Huu Huan—the famous leaders of the

\* Present appellations of Cochinchina, Tonkin and Annam.

anti-French movement in Nam Bo before the founding of the Communist Party—and many other patriots had sacrificed their lives for the Fatherland.

As a consequence of French colonial exploitation, the Viet Nam working class was born first in Nam Bo and the worker's movement also emerged there first. From 1930, under the banner of the Indochinese Communist Party the patriotic drive in Nam Bo gained in strength and scope. At the time of the founding of the anti-fascist Democratic Front (1936-1937), Nam Bo also took the lead in the national effort.

World War II broke out. The French colonialists ruthlessly suppressed our people's resistance. They stepped up military conscription to supply manpower for the war against Germany and secure cannon-fodder for a confrontation with Siam (Thailand) in Western Cambodia. In June 1940, France was occupied by Nazi troops. In September 1940, in Indochina, the French were defeated by Japanese fascists in Lang Son, and sold out Indochina to the enemy. All these developments strongly stimulated the anti-colonialist feeling among the Nam Bo people. Foreseeing the danger of collusion between the French and the Japanese, and taking advantage of the French collapse, we organised a general insurrection in an attempt to wrest back power. This was the direct cause leading to the Nam Ky uprising.

The situation was propitious. Workers and peasants clearly showed their firm resolve. Many patriotic figures of the middle class and a section of the

functionaries in the French colonial administration sided with the revolution, Vietnamese soldiers in the French army refused to go to the front. Their anti-war movement gained momentum. The popular masses strongly supported the uprising and seizure of power.

I would like to emphasise the profound origins of the uprising, which was the result of the system of national and class oppression imposed by the French colonialists and the reactionary feudal landlords and compradore bourgeoisie who co-operated with them. The centuries-old insurrectionary spirit and patriotic tradition of the Nam Bo people in particular and of the Vietnamese nation in general could not tolerate this situation. These were the main factors which led to the glorious success of the August 1945 Revolution and have been inspiring the long and valiant struggle of the Nam Bo people for the past 30 years. So it is clear that so long as contradictions still exist between our nation and aggressive imperialism, revolutionary action and armed uprising remain the inevitable course of action.

**QUESTION:** Please tell us about the course of events, during the uprising and its achievements.

**ANSWER:** In March 1940 the Nam Ky Committee of the Indochinese Communist Party worked out a plan for the preparation of the uprising.

In July 1940, its Standing Committee held an enlarged session to review the situation and decided to launch the insurrection.



From Nov. 22 to Nov. 30, 1940, the insurrection broke out in the provinces of Gia Dinh, My Tho, Cho Lon, Tan An, Can Tho, Vinh Long... Later, it spread to all other provinces of Nam Bo until the end of December 1940. It was particularly strong in Chau Thanh and Cai Lay districts (My Tho) and in the districts of Duc Hoa, Hoc Mon, Thu Thua, Tan Uyen, Tan Binh, Can Long etc. In Saigon, as its plan had been leaked, the French colonialists resorted to extensive terror and only a section of the army actually joined the revolt.

Elsewhere, there was feverish activity in preparation for the action. Revolutionary zeal was great among the masses.

At that time I was engaged in activities in My Tho province where the movement was developing in strength. I still remember that the directives for the uprising from the Nam Ky Party Committee reached us when we were in the jungle, where we were in hiding as there were spies everywhere. It was raining hard and we were having our meal. We read the instructions with excitement and enthusiasm. It came with the relief of rain in time of drought. The decision to launch the uprising, indeed, met the aspiration of the people who were longing for liberation.

For the oppressed masses, the order to take to the streets acts like a detonator. Everybody, old and young alike, was in high spirits. Young boys and girls did their farm work by day and underwent combat training by night. In the jungle, smith shops

and sewing-machines went into operation, making arms, flags, and clothes for the insurgent troops. People brought food, gunpowder and other commodities to the jungle as their contributions to the revolution.

The orders reached our province at 3 a.m. Nov. 23, 1940, and only 2 hours later, uprisings broke out in all the villages. Drums beats, gongs and toc-sins mingled with explosions of bamboo crackers resounded from one end of the province to the other. The people's forces, in full battle array, swarmed out and attacked the military posts. It was a forest of swords and spears and a sea of flags and banners. Village officials, scared out of their wits took flight. In some places, loud-speakers were used to call on soldiers to surrender. For the first time, the red flag with the gold star made its appearance, bringing enthusiasm and confidence to the masses. The revolutionary forces developed rapidly. A unit of insurgent troops, about one thousand in number, returned from an attack with its strength increased to two or three thousand.

People's revolutionary power was established in many villages. Immediately after its establishment, it brought real benefits to the people. A part of the land and other property owned by big reactionary landlords was confiscated and distributed to the poor. At that time in Nam Bo, apart from those reactionary landlords and compradore bourgeois who identified themselves with the imperialists, there were

many landlords and national bourgeois who joined the revolution and supported it with donations in the form of cash, land and rice-mills. With these contributions, the revolutionary power had enough rice and money to raise troops. Charity teams were set up to help the poor. People who were given paddy, carried it home with a festive air.

Revolutionary power ordered abolition of debts and all kinds of taxation. The people tore up all poll-tax forms. Acknowledgements of debts were stacked up and burnt. People watched the flames and cheered.

Revolutionary power also set up people's tribunals to try French agents who owed blood debts to the people. Justice was strictly done at these hearings. There were no unwarranted arrests or convictions. People's tribunals passed heavy sentences: this was quite understandable, considering the deep hatred accumulated among the people for years. However, the Party Committee, with its wise policy, appointed defence counsellors to see to it that the tribunals took into account all extenuating circumstances and the Party's policy of leniency. As a result, although people's tribunals could be found in many localities, most of the guilty persons were released after education. Out of gratefulness to the Party, many of them later supported the revolution.

From Dec. 31, 1940, onward, the enemy carried out savage repression; in many localities the people resisted them courageously. The revolutionary forces went underground.

**QUESTION 3:** How do you estimate the significance and influence of the uprising as far as the next step of the revolution and the present anti-US fight for national salvation are concerned?

**ANSWER:** The Nam Ky insurrection was unsuccessful because the objective conditions were not ripe. Yet it had an important significance and a profound influence on the struggle of the South Vietnamese people over the next 30 years. Just as the Nghe Tinh Soviets (1930-1931) and the Bac Son Rebellion (Sept. 1940), the Nam Ky Insurrection was a general rehearsal by our people of the August Revolution (1945). From this abortive attempt, our people could draw many precious lessons for their revolutionary effort in the following years.

Although it ended in a bloodbath, with many villages bombed out or burnt to the ground, tens of thousands of people arrested and jailed, and thousands of others linked together by wires driven through the palms of their hands and then flung in groups into the sea, yet it had aroused a sense of patriotic brotherhood in millions of South Vietnamese. A compelling example of staunchness and dauntlessness was set by the revolutionary fighters for the younger generations.

The revolutionary power was short-lived but it succeeded in instilling firm confidence in the masses. The Party's prestige was raised still further. The people acquired a stronger trust in their own

strength. That is why in 1943, after the revolutionary bases had been dislocated in many areas following two years of enemy white terror, the surviving communists could get into contact with one another comparatively easily. The masses again rallied around the Party and bases developed rapidly. In less than two years, Nam Bo was strong enough again to rise up once more and join the rest of the country in a general insurrection in August 1945. Surviving Party cadres and members who had taken part in the Nam Ky insurrection, afterwards formed the hard core of the revolutionary movement and have been active ever since. This continuity is an indispensable asset to the South Viet Nam Revolution.

Over the past 30 years, the Nam Bo people, upholding the glorious tradition of the Nam Ky insurrection, have successively resisted the French colonialists and then the US imperialists and their lackeys.

Today, on the soil formerly red with the blood of tens of thousands of fighters of the Nam Ky uprising, people from all walks of life are continuing to make sacrifices in defence of the "Iron Fortress of the Fatherland." The indomitable spirit of these fighters has forged millions of young people into staunch liberation fighters and outstanding combatants of great ability and heroism.

In commemorating the 30th anniversary of the Nam Ky insurrection, the South Vietnamese people

remember this glowing incident in the past of their native land and, with ever stronger confidence and determination, are marching forward under the NFL banner to defend the revolutionary power. They are deeply aware that they cannot live in peace and happiness unless they completely defeat the US aggressors, overthrow the reactionary administration — an agent of US imperialism — achieve independence and liberate the country.

*Recollection of the Nam Ky insurrection*A "HOSPITAL" OR THE BURIAL  
OF THE LIVING WITH THE DEAD

*The Nam Ky insurrection was followed by fierce repression. Whole villages were razed to the ground, tens of thousands of people massacred on the spot or tortured to death in prisons.*

*The story of Pham Van Hao, who was one of those who took part in the insurrection, gives some idea of the crimes committed by the colonialists.*

(Ed.)

A hospital was what they called it. In fact it was an annex to Cho Quan hospital in Saigon, the imperialists sent there the most seriously ill political prisoners from concentration camps in Saigon and the provinces after the November 23, 1940 insurrection in the South.

Surrounded by high walls and guard posts, this building was composed of three cells and a square room. There was also a mortuary. All the prisoners who had been relegated to this "hospital" suffered from serious illness, a consequence of tortures inflicted on them.

Most of them suffered from some kind of infected wound or other which, in the conditions in which

we lived, mortified rapidly to a fatal condition. No greater than a small lesion at first, the wound swelled rapidly and rotted, giving off a nauseating odour. The sick could eat nothing, lost flesh visibly and soon died.

The care received at the hospital was limited to applications of pomade and collective foot baths in a basin of potassium permanganate solution.

We lived as close as sardines in a tin. Even the veranda was so crowded that a man had literally to sleep on his neighbours' excrement. Each day about one-fifth of the prisoners died. Every morning the warder would crack his whip and ask: "How many dead last night?" As if it was the most natural thing in the world.

Other prisoners came to replace the dead. They died like poultry in times of fowl pest.

The most seriously sick were put in the square room, room No 4. It was a vestibule, the waiting-room for the mortuary. Those who were sent there lost all hope of returning to life. They were treated like oxen in the slaughter house.

I was classed in the category of dangerous communists. I had been transferred from a security post in Catinat street and was thrown into a special cell in the hospital. There, after a month of "treatment", my wounds actually improved a little. One day, availing myself of a favourable moment, I slipped into room 4.

I can never forget the view of this hell. In half-darkness, men like skeletons were lying on wooden



boards or even on the cement floor. A terrible stink composed of the sickening odour of rotten blood, sweat and excrements gripped me by the throat. The men were groaning feebly: I could feel that death was hanging about very near. I approached one of them. He was an old man, native of Vinh Long, who had taken part in the insurrection in Tam Binh and knew Le Van Khoe and Pham Van Lau, two revolutionaries of this locality.

A few days before he had been in my cell. We had spoken of the anti-Japanese struggle in China, our insurrections in Bac Son and Do Luong and Comrades Nguyen Van Cu, Ha Huy Tap and Nguyen Thi Minh Khai who were being detained in the death cells of the central prison. We spoke of the courage of Comrade H. who had refused to confess even when she was tied by the French to a tree in Loc Ninh forest infested with tigers. We also evoked Ng., the valiant commander of Gia Dinh guerrillas, and the 13-year-old liaison agent who despite the tortures inflicted by Bazin, the police chief and his men, would not open his mouth. The old man of Vinh Long and I, we had spoken of all this and of many other things.

But now, after fifteen days in this death room, he was only a skeleton covered with wrinkled skin. He had not eaten for many days. His bandages had putrified to a horrible brownish colour. His toes had become gangrenous and bleeding. Worms swarmed on his legs. His comrades who were in the same state as he could do nothing for him. The

colonial authorities could not have cared less. The dying old man cried out against the imperialist before whom he still felt strong.

I tried to speak to him, but he shook his head weakly and his eyes were wet with tears. "I'm going to die" he said. "This is not important. I am convinced. They are powerless before the revolutionary spirit of Nam Ky you, yourself, must live to go on fighting." I could not retain my tears. He consoled me: "Don't cry. You are young. You can survive. I hope that you will overcome all hardships that you will keep the fighting spirit. Me, I am content to lay down my life for the revolutionary cause."

I crawled toward another comrade who was lying unconscious on the floor. His neighbours told me that for many days he had not ceased speaking about his family and calling his wife in his delirium. Blood was flowing from a wound in his leg. It was gaping like the neck of a chicken whose throat had just been cut.

A few days later, there was a rumour of another inspection. The director of the Hospital ordered room 4 to be swept and the seriously sick patients, whether dying or not, to be carried to the mortuary. The four patients were thus covered and carried away. We raised a general cry of pain and indignation: "O God! They are going to bury our comrades alive!"

Through the key-hole of my cell, I saw this sad procession passing by. A man wrapped in a blanket

and carried like a package by both ends protruded his head from the blanket and feebly called out: "Good bye friends" Never can I forget the unspeakable expression of these eyes shining with anger and terror. Never can I forget this heart-rending adieu!

Yes, we have avenged them, him and thousands of other revolutionaries in the 1940 insurrection in South Viet Nam. The colonialists thought they could drown in blood the revolutionary spirit of our people. But the August 1945 Revolution and the long and victorious war of Resistance from 1945 to 1954 proved that they were greatly mistaken.

PHAM VAN HAO

*In the first decades of this century*

## SAIGON IN COLONIAL TIMES

**Editor's Note :**

*We reproduce here for the convenience of researchers large excerpts from a study by Ant. Brebion (Revue Indochinoise-1911) on the streets, monuments and outstanding features of Saigon, with the main events with which they were connected. This document brings out in stronger relief the colonialist spirit of the first decades of this century. For old names please consult the map published under French occupation.*

On the Saigon river, at the mouth of the tributary canal of the Chinese river-channel, half a kilometre from the confluent of the two stood the old Annamese edifice called South Fort, which was attacked a few hours before the capture of Saigon on Feb. 17 1859 by the batteries of Admiral Rigault de Genouilly's fleet. As damaged earth ramparts were repaired and the fort was occupied during the blockade of Saigon—from April 1859 to Feb. 1861, it was maintained as a military post in subsequent years. After 1866 it was used as a detention barrack then towards 1880 was abandoned by the military authorities.

... Two hundred metres upstream was the small parish church of Xom Chieu and further on at the

mouth of the Chinese arroyo was the Messageries Maritimes formerly Messageries Imperiales — which was established there in 1862. The hotel and shady garden of the principal agent of the company can also be seen. It is one of the finest residences in the city.

The building of a commercial wharf — from Messageries Maritimes to South Fort — began in 1900: the Tam Hoi Wharf.

The road which forks at the entry of the Messageries docks and storages under the name of South Fort Road, leads to the swing bridge which was built in 1890 over the Chinese river channel some hundred metres away from the confluent. In his April 23, 1863, order on the granting of a definitive concession relative to the ground occupied by the Company, Vice-Admiral Bonard had ruled that the Company had to meet the expenses incurred in the building of the bridge.

The other branch of the South Fort Road serves the Big Bridge, under the name of Messageries Maritimes street.

At the bifurcation formed by the left bank of the Chinese river-channel at its confluent, a brick pier ten metres wide and some twenty metres long, provided with a handrail and two flights of stairs, enables the small local craft to berth easily while moving from the left to the right bank of the channel, especially when there is a big mail-boat at the landing stage of the Messageries. Sampans ensure communications between the landing stages

and the commercial ships anchored in mid-stream or with the villages across the river from Saigon. They enable goods to be conveyed without the congestion of big crowds of Asian coolies, workers, employees and traders. This landing point, next to the open-shed of the Customs office on the banks of the Arroyo, was, less than ten years ago, a favourite rendezvous at sundown for European idlers and walkers seeking the freshness of the river breeze.

As long as Saigoneses can remember, this pier was an excellent place for picking up gossip, a centre for all news, from where the most sensational information and the most extraordinary rumours were spread. At a time when there were still few French households in the colony, it was a "Stock-exchange" for tittle-tattle that sprang from there to feed the gossip of coffee houses and messes in the city. It was a public place of assembly where events of the day were discussed and commented upon, where all colonial or metropolitan incidents were weighed and surveyed by local criticism. Hence its popular name of "Pointe des Blagueurs" (Jokers' Point) which was better known than the other name: "Landing stage of the Signal Mast", taken from the 30-metre high flag pole, solidly planted on the mainland, with shrouds of steel rope that impeded access to it.

Until 1883, capital executions by sabre were performed at this point at the Southern end of the city. The last two heads that fell there were those of the Annamese murderers of the Director of the

Registration Service named Boiloux. He was killed by his own servants at the instigation of his concubine. They took a hatchet and attacked him at 9 p.m. while he was sitting asleep under the verandah of his house at Catinat Street, on the second floor of the building of his Administration.

...Going up the Francis Garnier wharf from the Signal Mast, you will find on your left the office of the Trade Port Service, a very modest building whose facade is on Duperré Street. This street and Krantz Street are the two lateral roads intersecting the former My Tho Boulevard, whose central section was occupied by the station of the Saigon — My Tho railway line which was also intended to be the main station for the Transindochinese Railway of which only the Saigon — Bien Hoa — Phan Thiet section was opened to circulation.

Farther on from the station in the station-office of the Saigon — Cholon steam tramway called "Tramway of the Higher way".

At the angle of Krantz Street and the wharf stands the building of the Customs Directorate, a large building of solid proportions and monumental pretensions. It was built between 1885 and 1887 from a plan designed by Alfred Fouthous, Head of the Civil Buildings Service, on the site of a house of the same size known as the Van Tai House or Hotel, which fell into ruin and was condemned at the end of 1885. The Chinese of French citizenship Van Tai who built the first house was a merchant, intelligent and full of initiative. This hotel designed

on the model of Singapore hotels was popular. Van Tai however made an even better deal in selling it to the colonial authority towards 1880 at a time when his own solvency became problematic. The Administration installed the Customs Office there to replace the Opium Farming Office: the organization of the new Office was entrusted to Mr. Boyer, head commissioner for the Navy.

Charner Boulevard, 40 metres wide and one kilometer long, stands fronting the river and ends at the Town Hall to which it forms a grandiose introduction. It has experienced several big transformations.

At the time of our first occupation of the area, its central section was the bed of a muddy river channel which meandered through the lower town, cutting it up as it forked. This waterway sprang from the present day site of the City School for Girls near the Botanical Garden, then, its tortuous stream carried the mud and silt downwards to the present sites of the City Power Station, the Theatre and that part of Bonard Boulevard which lies between Catinat Street and Charner Boulevard.

The bed of the channel was filled up in 1884 as far as the entrance to Ormay Street. The remaining part was canalized between two banks reinforced with bricks and preserved in that state to make it easier for vegetable-sellers to reach the Central market, and at the same time serve as a mooring place for indigenous river crafts. Flights of stairs were built on both sides. At low tide, this dead end



collected all kinds of refuse, and became a foul sewer and a real danger to public health.

... It was in 1886 that work started on clearing it; this took two years.

The Road which took the place of the canal, completely transformed the boulevard: the idea of building a fine 20-metre wide road was put into effect: bushes and trees in the upper section of the avenue were cleared away, the bandstand was demolished, and large pavements planted with new trees appeared instead. But then the upkeep of the immense road and the repair of continually broken pavements was too costly; so for economy's sake it was decided to keep only one central roadway of cement.

... On the left side of Charner Boulevard, in front of d'Ormay Street is the "Justice de Paix" (Court of Conciliation) flanked by Hamelin and Ohier streets. Up to 18... on this site stood the Cathedral known as "Sainte Marie Immaculée" (St Mary the Immaculate) erected in accordance with Engineering Colonel Coffyn's plans. The foundation stone was laid on March 28, 1863.

The edifice was made of wood and access to it was by a solid flight of ten steps. The presbytery was built on the site of old Annamese houses along the Canal. They had been demolished when the present-day Market was installed.

... On the left side of Ohier Street which links Pellerin Street to Charner Boulevard past Chaigneau Street, are three strange-looking constructions

standing side by side vaguely reminiscent of fortresses or prisons. They are the dwelling houses of chettys Hindu bankers, and in front of them is the Brahminic temple of their faith.

This part of the street is inhabited by Indian natives, and looks like a Cingalese road.

In the upper part of Charner Boulevard on the right are two houses bearing numbers 104 and 106. The first one with a small garden in front of it is now occupied by the office of the "Hotel des Nations". Both of these houses were built some forty years ago for the Parisian bankers Pereire, owners of the Tu Duc sugar-mill and of a considerable acreage of land on the territory of that commune on the bank of the Saigon river.

The City Hall of which the Boulevard forms the solemn approach, is a costly building overburdened which ornate cornices, mascarons and false colonnettes in stucco, topped by a truncated belfry on the pattern of these pavilions whose style is associated with the names of Vespasian and de Rambuteau, two large terraces provided with balustrades support the main body of the monument to the height of the first storey. The whole construction is in very bad taste. So we shall refrain from mentioning the name of the two architects who had to spend nearly ten years 1900-1908 to complete the designs for this edifice.

Parallel to Charner Boulevard on the left is Flower street<sup>1</sup>, a narrow lane situated behind the

1. This street name is borrowed from Chinese poetry.

Customs House building which links Van Tai Alley to the Market. In 1884, it housed the Chinese residents' illegal brothels—the Bamboo<sup>1</sup>—visited particularly by soldiers and sailors. When finally expelled from the neighbourhood of the market they took refuge in Batavia Street—Admiral Courbet Street—then only a squalid forerunner of the wide modern road. Driven from this street in 1891, when the City Highways Department completed its plans, they had to withdraw to a distant street in the indigenous quarter between Annamese houses in the same line of business and those of Japanese newly settled in Cochinchina.

...A hundred metres from Charner Boulevard, Catinat Street opens obliquely on to the wharf: it follows the line of the old Annamese road from the River to the citadel: on the map of the city drawn by Lucien de Grammont in 1862, it bears the name of Palanqua Street. It is 20 metres wide and some fifteen hundred metres long and constitutes the main thoroughfare of the city, the most crowded, with the biggest number of European shops and coffeehouses; it leads to the highest point of the city—a plateau where the cathedral in its square is situated, it continues farther, forking into two sections: the first is Blanesube street called “prolonged Catinat street” prior to 1899, and ending up

1. Bamboos is the vulgar name used in Indochina to designate brothels, since in small towns they are situated at some distance from the main dwellings in places surrounded by bamboo-trees.

at the water-tower ; the second section, called Garcerie street, ends at the junction with Mayer Street.

The commercial part of Catinat Street stops at the intersection of Espagne Street ; from here as far as the Cathedral Square, right on both sides of the road are administrative buildings occupied by the offices of various departments of the colonial administration.

On the corner of Catinat Street and the Wharf stands a fine circular two-storey building which became the property of the "Administration des Messageries fluviales de Cochinchine". It was built about 1875 by a merchant from Nantes — Joseph Hubert alias "the Counsellor of Nantes", a prosperous trader and a good fellow whose naive commercial pride simplistic jokes and sudden tantrums amused his contemporaries to the extent that they were recorded in the local annals. One of his professions of worthiness as candidate to the Colonial Council began as follows : "... Owner of a valuable building and prosperous trader..." He certainly succeeded in making people laugh. Here is another feature of his character : the cannon which was fired on the wharf by the Navy at noon had as its customary echo a formidable oath issued by J. Hubert, who alleged that the column of air set in motion by the cannon-shot would endanger the structure of his property.

The ground floor at the corner has been occupied ever since its foundation by the "Café de la Rotonde". This establishment which until 1892 was the

finest and the most popular in the city, was owned in turn by many local celebrities: first Mother Perrier, a woman from Auvergne who for some reason liked to act as a middlewoman and had an innate sense of hierarchy. Thus, when Duke De Penthievre, then a lieutenant commander stationed in Saigon, came to see her, whether alone or with his military or civilian friends, the lady could be heard ordering: "Boy! bring an armchair for Mochieu Duke Pentere, a chair for Mochieu the Inspector, a stool for the Captain (the lieutenant or the administrator, etc.)

The provisional theatre demolished in 1899 had been inaugurated in the 1884-1885 season. Built by the city architect Berger in the strip of land in the angle between Catinat Street and Bonard Boulevard, it was situated in a space partly occupied by the City School for Boys, founded in 1867; its first director was Monsieur Antonetti. The building of this school was originally constructed of wood left from demolitions; in 1872 it was altered and rebuilt as a theatre by the same architect Berger. As it fell into ruins it was demolished in 1882 and the place for theatrical performances was transferred for two years to Perret Houses in Rigault de Genouilly Square. The second Berger theatre was a hall some forty metres long, twenty metres wide with a row of boxes on each side on the ground floor on a level with the stage — and another circle on the first floor.

At the other corner of Catinat Street and the Boulevard, stood the Saigon City Hall demolished

1899 — a very ordinary building with one storey and surrounded by open verandahs, to which however was given the stately name of City Hall. An uncultivated small garden about fifteen square metres wide separated the "city Hall" from the Continental Hotel.

... At Catinat street, on the present-day site of Omnium Stores, whose construction was completed in 1908, two metres back from the street there used to stand a fairly large, glass roofed hangar occupied by the Saigon Auction Market, transferred there towards 1880 by the auctioneers Bernard Fleith and Laplace. There were regular auction sales every Sunday morning. The sales of horses and vehicles that took place for a long period on the road surface of Catinat Street, between Bonard Boulevard and Espagne Street, were transferred to Espagne Street in 1892 then again retransferred towards 1900 to the upper section of Charner Boulevard.

... At the two other corners of Catinat Street are the buildings of the Treasury: on the right that of the City Tax Collector and Chief Accountant's Office, and on the left that of the local Treasurer and Tax Collector's Office.

Between Catinat Street and Rigault de Genouilly Square — the former Circus — is the Agence des Messageries Fluviales, a company created in 1882 by Jules Rueff. The building occupied by the Offices and the local director was erected in 1890. Behind it are part of the attached workshops. This enterprise

succeeded that of the Roch brothers whose contract with the Colony was not renewed.

At the centre of Rigault de Genouilly Square alias Circus Square—stands the statue of the Admiral by Sculptor Alex Lequien. He is represented standing in plain clothes, bare headed, leaning against a gun-carriage. The monument has a certain dignity. Its granite pedestal surrounded by golden-pointed railings, bears on two sides bronze carriages representing in relief the arrival of the fleet at Cap Saint Jacques and the capture of Saigon city. Two festoons of laurel leaves—one of which is made of bronze—adorn the pedestal.

At the inauguration of this monument erected through nationwide subscription in 1878, the Head Naval Commissioner wrote an ode glorifying Rigault de Genouilly:

“No, bronze is not always a metal that kills  
“When from the sculptor’s hand emerges a statue,  
“It is to immortalise a name for posterity,  
“Assign a palm and even a crown,  
“A posthumous and well deserved prize....”

The open space is divided into three semicircular grassed platforms which before 1890 were planted with small trees and shaded from the sun by tamarrinds. On the left platform the pyramid from the entrance of Charner Canal commemorating the Mekong Expedition of Doudart de Lagree was re-erected. On the central platform, behind the Admiral’s statue (which hides it) is a pyramid four to

five metres high, placed on a pedestal and topped by a pine-cone, with this simple but cryptic inscription: "To Lamaille with gratitude, Saigon Merchants".

... From the square five roads radiate; Vannier Street, Turc Street, Doudart de Lagree Street, which formerly bore the name of Bien Hoa Street and ends at Ormay Street; National Street, formerly Imperial Street, and Paul Blanchy Street laid out in 1904.

It should be mentioned that in the left corner between this road and Taberd Street is the building occupied by the Brethren of Christian Schools under the name Taberd School, which was created by Reverend Father De Kersan towards 1875 to care for abandoned half cast Europeans.

Beyond Norodom Boulevard, the street forms the boundary between the former Scholars' Camp and the Lieutenant-General's Garden.

...Primauguet Wharf begins at one corner of the upper end of Rigault de Genouilly Square. Beside it are the barracks of the Crew of the Fleet and the Mobile Defence, vast three-storey concrete buildings completed in 1908. They occupy a whole section of the original site of the courtyard and storage depots of the old Directorate of Port Movements, Troop Transports, Supply and Commissariat.

Next to them, at the end of a garden surrounded by high railings are the buildings and offices of the Commander of the Navy.

... Parallel to Luro Boulevard and a hundred metres to the right is Rousseau Street, formerly Tay



Ninh Street, which runs from the Arsenal compound at the end of Espagne Street to Richaud Street. Protected from the sun by superb Saos trees (*hopcia sparia*)—it runs along high walls on the left, enclosing the Botanical Garden and on the right the Pyrotechnical School.

No. 1 is the entrance to Dr Angier's Hospital established in a section of the "Ste Enfance" building. No. 3 is the old d'Adran College. This has now been turned into the City School for Girls which was originally the "Institution" founded about 1875 by Mademoiselle Chealon who later became Dame Dus-sutour. It was transferred in 1892 from Charner Boulevard.

This establishment d'Adran College had been created by virtue of an order issued by Admiral Bonard in January 1862 and was intended for sons of the local population; its management had been entrusted to the Brethren of Christian Schools who were subsequently expelled from it by Le Myre de Villers in 1882 and forced to leave Cochinchina. Lay education was then introduced by the Administration. The College operated under state patronymic till the end of 1890. In 1891 as a result of a new plan of school organization, the colony maintained only one 2nd level school, the Chasseloup Laubat College. After this last transformation there remained only a preparatory school installed in an outlying building facing onto Taberd Street and cut off by a wall from the rest of the disused college.

The Botanical Garden on the right of Rousseau Street occupies an area of about 5 hectares sandwiched between Rousseau street, the Arsenal, the Avalanche and Chasseloup Laubat street. It was laid out in 1865 by Botanist J.B. Pierre. Nicely arranged and well kept, it has some very interesting sample of the tropical flora of the old and new worlds. A scientific laboratory was added to it in 1907.

The Avalanche channel whose meandering stream forms the city's eastern limit, owes its name to a gunboat that exploded there. It is a muddy river, almost dry out at low tide, which only indigenous craft can navigate upstream of the first bridge.

In 1893 the navy set up wharves on the banks by the Botanical Garden to serve the Pyrotechnical School to which the latter are linked by a few hundred metres of railway.

To the South west the city limits are formed by the Chinese Channel and since 1900, by Tan Hoa street. The low lying Saigon-Cholon, tram-line starts from Charner Boulevard and follows the banks of the channel from its confluence to the terminus in the heart of Cholon.

Sheds of the Customs-House occupy the banks of this river from its mouth to d'Adran street (so named in commemoration of Mgr Pigneau de Behaine, holder in partibus of the bishopric of d'Adran. In this road the colonial administration set up a swing bridge carrying a railway. This passage operates only at certain hours. D'Adran Street, the

busiest street in the native quarter, is cut by the My Tho and Bien Hoa railway line. It ends at Ohier Street, behind the Court of Conciliation, skirts the Market, to which there is access from both d'Adran and Charner Boulevard. It is the centre of Asian retail trade. Before 1890 Hindu bankers — the chettys, those terrible people who drain away indigenous savings, and live in groups constituting a kind of phalanstery — had three groups in the upper section of this street, close to the building occupied by the Immigration Department.

The Chinese channel wharf planted with two rows of tamarind-trees<sup>1</sup>, is occupied by banks, factories and foreign trading companies.

Farther up d'Adran street are Chaigneau street inhabited by the small workshops and the Chinese money-lenders serving Asians; and Pellerin<sup>2</sup> street, one of the longest in the city — ending at the city's western limit. After its junction with Bonard Boulevard, on its left can be seen the Casino, an attractive and well-appointed establishment opened in 1909; farther up, at the junction with Norodom Boulevard, which has been considerably widened, stands the statue of Gambetta erected in 1889 after a design by Falguieres.

1. *tamarindas indica*.

1. Pellerin (Mgr Francois-Marie-Agathon) First Apostolic Vicar of Northern Cochinchina. Born at the diocese of Quimper in 1812. Died at Poulo-Penang on Sept. 13, 1862.

The bare-headed figure, draped with an open fur-lined coat, vaguely extends an arm in a tragic gesture. Two shoddy plaques, also made of bronze, occupy the right and left of the pedestal which stands about five metres from ground-level supporting the statue whose presence here cannot be explained in any way, unless intended to scare the Annamese natives by his polar costume and his grim expression.

... Still farther up Pellerin street is the bacteriological Department of the Pasteur Institute which was founded in 1891 within the Military Hospital. It was transferred in 1908 to the large estate, where in 1899 the Catholic mission set up its little seminary.

From Bonard Boulevard to Chasseloup Laubat street Pellerin street is lined with superb tamarind-trees, and from Chasseloup Laubat street on, by thirty-year-old saos.

Between Taberd street and Chasseloup Laubat street is the European cemetery laid out after our installation in Saigon. It was removed to give space to the Government General's Park, and the graves were transferred to the present necropolis—the Garden of Father d'Ormay.

Surrounded by high railings, with three monumental gates arranged in a semi-circle, between two single story chalets, a keeper's lodge and a guard-room, the Governor General's palace is 80 metres long; it has two attic stories between two wings on either side of a central section topped by a dome

behind a facade. A large balcony covers the entrance, giving access to the first floor up a double ramp for carriages and a stately flight of stairs.

This dwelling-house with its bastard and pretentious style, looks well, however, in the midst of high trees in a carefully tended park.

Its Assembly Hall preceded by an anteroom is very fine. It consists of a large salon seven metres high ending in a rotunde with small circular windows.

The Palace was built in 1872 and designed by the Architect Lhermitte, who came from Hongkong where he had built the Town Hall. At the time it was alleged that it cost the Colony twelve million francs. It was inaugurated at the end of 1873.

Since 1892 an immense lawn has spread in front of the palace where there was a pond six or seven metres deep encircling an islet. It took the whole of 1891 for convict manpower to fill up the pond with earth carried from Testard street by means of a narrow-gauge railway.

Mac Mahon street runs the whole length of the Government Park shaded by tall tecks (*tectona grandis*) (In its further sections, it is shaded alternately either by *terminalia vermicia*<sup>1</sup> or by tamarind-trees).

For the first visit by King Norodom to Saigon on the occasion of the opening of the 1867 Agricultural Exhibition, the programme of festivities included theatrical version of the capture of Saigon.

1. Cay bang (*terminalia vermicia*).

... The land between Testard and Richaud Streets was until 1898 part of an estate known as Barbet Pagoda, so named in commemoration of an infantry captain who was killed there in an ambush on December 7, 1860. The pagoda was erected by Gia Long to mark the birth in this place of one of his sons who later became Minh Mang. The pagoda was subsequently put to another purpose — education, and sheltered the City School for Boys between 1872 and 1874. By 1874 Chasseloup Laubat College was founded and it was transferred to its present-day building in 1878.

The city's transverse streets in the indigenous quarter are located in the section between Slaughter-House Boulevard and Charner Boulevard. They consist of Lefèvre Street beginning at d'Adran Street and ending at the water station of the slaughter-house; Dayot, Hanallin and Admiral Courbet Streets formerly Batavia Street. The latter, beginning at Mac Mahon Street, was completed and arranged only in 1900. While it was passable only as far as the railway depots for two years it sheltered those public houses which had been expelled from Flower street and were finally relegated to the Boresse quarter in 1895. The city had its pound at No. 5 and to the left at the corner of Nemesis Street it built the city stores and workshops in 1900.

... The theatre which stood back from Catinat Street, was built from 1897 to 1899 and opened in October of that year. It was conceived according to a plan by Ferre, a Parisian architect who won the

competition between French architects. The execution of the work was conducted by Guichard, a graduate architect from the city of Paris, who had to make a great number of modifications to the prize-winning plan. The final cost of that elegant monument which is provided with a mobile ceiling and can accommodate 800 spectators, was over one million francs.

... The building of the City theatre necessitated the modification of the central part of Bonard Boulevard. Its trees planted in alternate rows were felled and replaced by lawn intersected by path ways and in 1910 Francis Garnier's statue was put there.

Farther up Espagne Street one encounters La Grandière Street. Protected from the sun by superb tamarind-trees, it starts at Luro Boulevard and continues as far as Cholon, under the name of High Road, which it assumes after the Cho Dui level crossing.

On the right, it passes the Military hospital built in 1859, staffed by naval physicians and pharmacists until the formation of a civil health authority for the colonies took their place. The hospital was built on an embankment two metres above the level of the road. It occupies an immense pentagon between public thoroughfares, with Lafont and Paul Blanchy Streets on the right and left. There are separate wings for civilian and military sick. Since October 1896, a pavilion is reserved for sick women and

maternity cases. The Nuns from St Paul des Chartres who fulfilled the function of nurses there were dismissed in 1904. In 1910 the Colonial Military Engineering Corps built a double operating theatre in Paul Blanchy Street which is unique in the Far East. There is a section for contagious diseases at Taberd Street designed to meet all the requirements of comfort and modern hygiene; a room for electrotherapy and another one for hydrotherapy on the latest model.

... Crossing Catinat Street, at right angles to De La Grandière Street, one may find a new building intended to become the residence of the Director of the Domains and Stamp Department. It was completed in early 1910 and had a modern style of architecture. Adjoining it is the Colonial Archives building dating from 1905. In this building big bundles and parcels of administrative documents and records of considerable historic interest were piled up in boxes or simply on shelves, if not actually on the ground, and relegated to various lumber rooms, with no care given to their preservation. Most of them were found heaped up and abandoned in a room on the first floor of the Saigon Primary School at d'Adran College.

Rats, cockroaches, white ants and humidity contributed their best to the work of destruction, which colonial casualness had abandoned without any feeling of remorse. Irretrievable damage has been done to material dated before 1875. There was only just time to save what still remained. The



methodical classification of Archives, begun four years ago, will certainly render great services, once it is completed, to those who are interested in the fifty years of French Cochinchina.

... The level-crossing passed, De La Grandière Street becomes the Cholon High Road also named "Pond Road". It was designed by Colonel Olivier in 1789. On the right, two hundreds metres from the Cho Dui<sup>1</sup> station can be observed a superb church built in 1902 on the site of the former Spooner estate according to a plan by Reverend Father Boutier, Curate of the Cathedral. The builders were the Annamese with Le Phat Dat's executors. Spooner was an American who took French citizenship. He had been in Cochinchina right at the beginning of 1861, in his capacity as a journalist. He was present at the capture of Bien Hoa of which he gave some account and illustrations to the press. Having settled in the colony, he held quite an honorable position and played a very important role in trade there for about twenty years.

... At the Cathedral Square opening at the foot of Catinat Street begins the city's plateau, 12 metres above sea level. It is bounded on one side by the Post and Telegraph Office designed by Architect Villedieu who later became head of the Civil Buildings Office in Tonkin. The Post and Telegraph Office started to be built in 1886 and was completed

1. Market of Raw Silk.

in 1890, its central hall is topped by an elegant dome.

To the left is the presbytery erected in the middle of a raised garden 2 metres above street level. The Cathedral known as Notre Dame shuts off the whole area with its imposing mass of granite and bricks. Of Roman style, its porch which dominates the facade, supports two square towers forty metres high, topped by two iron arrows placed there in 1900. The building of the church was started in 1876 under the direction of Bouvard, its architect. The deep excavations necessary for the foundations revealed a number of stone instruments of the neolithic age. The clock was fixed on the tympanum of the facade only in 1886; the following year, the inner pillars of the big nave threatened collapse and needed underpinning. They were entirely rebuilt in granite. The bricks of which the pillars had been originally built were inadequately baked and crumbled under the weight of the vaulting.

In front of the Cathedral, in the middle of a grass square, rises a red granite column built in March 1902 and topped by a bronze statue of Mgr Pigneau de Behaine, Bishop of Adran's designed by E. Lormier.

The square is protected from the sun on all its sides by a double row of *saos*, and previously by "candle-berry"-trees<sup>1</sup> removed in 1898.

1. Cay Dau Lac (*Aliurites molucrana*).

... Norodom<sup>1</sup> Boulevard which extends from the Governor General's palace to the Botanical Garden was opened in 1866. It received the King of Cambodia's name on the occasion of his visit to Saigon early in 1867, when the first agricultural exhibition took place there. It comprises three sections of quite different character: the first between the Governor General's palace and the Cathedral chevet, is 80 metres wide. The road is bordered with saos planted in alternate rows and with grass strips. The lateral ways form Admiral Page Street (alias Hong Kong street) on the left, and on the right, Bishopric Street which was renamed Colombert Street. In the latter street, at the corner with Pellerin Street is the bishop's modest house surrounded by walls, the property of the Colony.

The second section of the Boulevard narrows to the central road surface and runs between the left side of the church chevet and Bangkok Street. In this section one can see the Military Club and the garrison mess, on the right, surrounded by a garden with a band stand where on Wednesdays from half past five to seven, colonial infantry music was heard. There are two tennis courts on Paul Blanchy Street. In front are the offices of the Finance Department, a rented property which was, in 1898, let to the Secretariat General of Indochina, an administrative bureau removed in 1907 after ten

1. Norodom I., King of Cambodia, reigned from Nov. 1859 to 1904.

years of existence. A little farther on, occupying the corner of Paul Blanchy Street, in a small park surrounded by high railings, is the residence of the Lieutenant General, Commander of Indochina troops. Next is the ground on which the Colonial Military Engineering Corps built the offices and audience room of the War Council in 1904, which had been formerly accommodated in a building located in the courtyard of the "Gendarmerie".

Lastly the third section of Norodom Boulevard, planned and opened in 1897 under the administration and orders of Lieutenant-governor Picanon, lies between Bangkok street, and the Botanical Garden. Its road surface occupies the ditches — filled up for the purpose — of the Minh Mang Citadel which we took on Feb. 17, 1859 and subsequently dismantled because, on account of our limited troops and armament, we could not ensure its defence. The remains of old moats can still be seen between Bangkok and Michelet Streets, to the right and left of Larclauze Street and again at No. 109 of Paul Blanchy Street. The Southern bastion of the city was once at the present intersection of Chasseloup-Laubat and Blancsubé Streets.

This old fortress was built on part of the site of the one set up in 1789 by Olivier de Puymanel — Colonel Olivier who was at the service of Gia Long. Gia Long's son and successor later destroyed it completely in 1835 following Le Van Khoi's uprising.

... Behind the Cathedral an avenue 40 metres wide links Norodom Boulevard to Water Tower Square, under the name of Blancsubé, formerly an extension of Catinat Street (1st section). To the left can be seen a large turfed quadrangle, in the middle of which rises a building housing the operational machinery of the Water Department. At each corner, is a kiosk with iron grills covering air shafts. This square is the last remaining site of the barrack where the Annamese government once accommodated students coming for regional examinations to obtain various literary degrees. When Saigon was under the control of our troops, it was transformed into a military barrack which was given the name of Scholars' Camp. It was protected by a wall and later about 1890 occupied by companies of native soldiers then known as Annamese light infantrymen, which name was later changed into Indigenous Riflemen.

It is at the "Scholars' Camp" that the June 5, 1862 Treaty was signed, by virtue of which Tu Duc surrendered to France the three provinces of Saigon (Gia Dinh) — Bien Hoa — My Tho and the islands of Poulo Condore.



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